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Model shown Jeep Renegade 1.4 MultiAir II 140 hp Longitude 2WD Manual at £20,295 including Special Pastel Paint at £500. OFFICIAL FUEL CONSUMPTION FIGURES FOR JEEP RENEGADE RANGE MPG (L/100KM): EXTRA URBAN 47.9 (5.9) – 70.6 (4.0), URBAN 32.5 (8.7) – 51.4 (5.5), COMBINED 40.9 (6.9) – 61.4 (4.6), CO<sub>2</sub> EMISSIONS: 160 – 120 G/KM. Fuel consumption and CO<sub>2</sub> figures are obtained for comparative purposes in accordance with EC directives/regulations and may not be representative of real-life driving conditions. Factors such as driving style, weather and road conditions may also have a significant effect on fuel consumption. \*Customer deposit is £5,046. Optional Final Payment is £9,672. Contract Term is 24 months. Promotion available on new Renegade 1.4 MultiAir II 140 hp Longitude with Special Pastel paint registered by 30th September 2015. Jeep Deposit Contribution only available in conjunction with Jeep Horizon PCP. With Jeep Horizon you have the option to return the vehicle and not pay the final payment, subject to the vehicle not having exceeded an agreed annual mileage (a charge of 6p per mile for exceeding 10,000 miles per annum in this example) and being in good condition. Finance subject to status. Guarantees may be required. Terms and Conditions apply. At participating Dealers only. Jeep Financial Services, PO Box 4465, Slough, SL1 0RW. Jeep® is a registered trademark of FCA US LLC.



## ON THE COVER

Danny Milner test rides the new Orbea Occam 660b trail bike  
Photographer: Juanjo Otazu



# Contents

**mbr** SEPTEMBER 2015

A Lake District ride that's probably best forgotten? Page 66

## FEATURES

### ON THE COVER

#### 58 TRAIL CENTRE FOCUS: FOREST OF DEAN

All walks of life descend on FoD each weekend to cut loose on its maze of singletrack. We meet a few of its biggest fans

### ON THE COVER

#### 66 ROUTE OF ALL EVIL

Some ideas are best left in the imagination, as Sim Mainey found out when he took on a mental challenge in the Lakes

#### 76 FIRST TIME FOR EVERYTHING: MEGAVALANCHE

Pete Scullion joins 1,200 other lunatics to throw himself down a glacier in the French Alps to the sound of '90s techno music

The ice men cometh...  
page 76



A Vitus Escarpe with £900 off? What's the catch? p126

## BIKES IN THIS ISSUE

BMC Speedfox SF02 XT 135  
Commencal Meta HT AM 110  
GT Sensor 114  
Kona Honzo AL DL 40  
Lapierre Zesty XM 527 44  
Orbea Occam AM M-LTD 42  
Specialized Rockhopper Pro Evo 650b 131  
Transition TransAM 29 114  
Trek Procaliber 18  
Trek Remedy 9 29 110  
Vitus Escarpe 290 Pro 139  
Vitus Escarpe VRX 112

## BIKES & GEAR

### ON THE COVER

#### 18 TREK PROCALIBER

Half hardtail, half suspension bike, softtails are back in fashion with Trek and BMC leading the charge

### ON THE COVER

#### 20 OHLINS AIR SHOCK

Gold standard suspension performance promised by Specialized's tie-up with Ohlins

### ON THE COVER

#### 38 FIRST RIDES

RockShox's new Lyrik fork, Kona's alloy Honzo and Orbea's Occam

#### 102 PRODUCT TESTING

Camelbak Skyline hydration pack, Specialized Ambush helmet and more

#### 110 LONGTERMER BIKES

Trek, Kona, Vitus and Commencal

### ON THE COVER

#### 116 DISC BRAKES

Four, four-piston brakes, four lightweight models and three budget stoppers rated

### ON THE COVER

#### 126 DISCOUNT BIKES

It's that time of year when you can bag a bargain. We test three bikes boasting 20 per cent off, or more







Learn from the racers:  
top tips for speed and  
confidence on page 94

## HOW TO

### ON THE COVER

#### 90 FIT A DIRECT-MOUNT RING

Simplify your drivetrain and save weight with our guide to direct-mount chainrings

#### 92 WORKSHOP GUIDE

Get your Shimano disc brakes stopping on a dime with a step-by-step bleed

### ON THE COVER

#### 94 ENDURO SKILLS FOR TRAIL RIDERS

Raise your trail-riding game with tips from experienced enduro racer, Toby Pantling



Ohlins's new air  
shock. Page 20



De-gassing Shimano  
brakes, page 92

## REGULARS

### 10 BIG PICTURES

### 17 BUZZ

### 48 REAL-WORLD RIDING

### 50 BORN-AGAIN RIDER

### 53 MAILBOX

### 56 READER PHOTOS

### 74 RIDE GUIDE

### 146 AFTERIMAGE

## Rest in peace

*Tragic news from the past few weeks put life in perspective*

**S**winley Forest on a Saturday in late July. Mark Kingston, an ex-serviceman and father of two, was riding the Red 25 trail alone when it is believed he collided with a tree. Despite the best efforts of the riders who found him and performed CPR, he was pronounced dead on the scene.

Just over a week later, Will Olson was competing in the Enduro World Series at Crested Butte, Colorado, when he crashed out on a timed stage. He died there, by the side of one of his local trails.

I know it's a cliché, but Mark and Will died doing something they loved — something we all love, in fact. And when anyone's life can be snatched away at any moment, that feels like something important. Mountain biking isn't particularly dangerous; sure, you can pick up some scars and broken bones, but fatalities are horrible flukes, and they can happen any time, any place, to anyone.

There's no lesson to learn from accidents like these. All we can do is pay our respects. This issue is dedicated to Mark and Will, and their families and friends. Every trail has to end somewhere, so savour every second of the ride.

*finan*  
Editor, **mbr**



Tributes paid to two  
riders, one who died  
at Crested Butte



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Turn to page 100



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# GX

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1 x 11  
2 x 11  
2 x 10

## RIDE YOUR WAY



### FAR AND WIDE

For every bike, there's a rider. A rider who builds it. A rider who knows it. A rider who's always ready to take the bike somewhere new. Introducing GX, the drivetrain for people who love to ride without restraint. From beginner to expert, GX delivers personalized gear choices that take you as far and wide as you want to go. Engineered in Germany with 1x and 2x options, SRAM GX brings the power of riding to everyone, everywhere.

[SRAM.COM/GX](http://SRAM.COM/GX)

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## Big picture

Think of Taiwan and the chances are you'll imagine sprawling industrial zones pumping out container-loads of brand new bicycles. What you probably don't expect are towering mountain ranges and dusty singletrack through meadows of dwarf bamboo. It's a surprise even to many of the locals, who rarely seem to explore their inland backcountry. All of which means riders like Lee Trumppore have this fantastic playground to themselves. Although becoming a master of the selfie is a necessity.

*Lee Trumppore*







## Big picture

Chaos reigned across the trails of Serfaus during this year's Kona media launch as journalists from around the world tried to outrun the mother of all electrical storms. In the mayhem, there were numerous punctures, a suspected broken collarbone and fragmented groups strewn over the mountain. Even those who thought they were safe ended up swinging from stricken gondolas as the power was cut to lift stations. Eventually everyone made it back to base, and there were plenty of stories to tell over a schnapps or two that evening.

*Ale Di Lullo*







## Big picture

How much walking would you deem acceptable on a ride? None? Five minutes? Ten minutes? An hour? We had plenty of time to ponder this question during a challenging day around Ennerdale. I began the day thinking I had a pretty high tolerance threshold to hike-a-bikes, but after carrying my bike down a couple of descents I was ready to throw in the towel. Especially since my mates seemed to be relishing threading the needle between the Lakeland rocks. Read more about my stairway to hell on page 66.

*Sim Mainey*





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# The Buzz

START YOUR RIDE HERE

Edited by Jamie Darlow

GEAR

RIDES

FAST & FIT

INSPIRATION

GET STARTED

## QUOTE OF THE MONTH

**"DON'T BE AFRAID TO STICK A LEG, ELBOW OR TONGUE OUT TO HELP YOU"**

*Staying upright by any means, page 26*

# SINGLETRACK CITY

*Sheffield revamps its community-run Grenoside Woods trails*

Grenoside Woods in Sheffield — home to Peaty's Steel City DH event, countless mates' races and of course the great Steve Peat himself — has undergone a major trail facelift this summer. There's resurfacing and more jumps, but perhaps more importantly, it's proof that a community-controlled and funded mountain bike scene really does work.

The Steel City DH trail, one of three official tracks receiving attention, now has superbly

crafted berms to hold your speed in the corners. It's also been resurfaced to make it smoother and faster, while a new black-graded option is now open, packed with jumps and tables.

"We build in flow from top to bottom; it's all about carrying speed and making sure corners are in the right place," says Jordan Gould from Biketrack.org, who put spade to dirt. The three trails — Steel City, Pub Run and DH3 — flow seamlessly and won't pool water, Jordan says.

The £20,000 worth of changes have been funded by the success of the mountain bike scene in Sheffield; specifically, Peaty's Steel City DH, which now draws over 200 competitors and thousands of spectators. With rider group Ride Sheffield, new trails (including Parkwood Springs in the heart of the city), strong local council support and proximity to the Peak District, Sheffield is increasingly looking like the mtb city with everything.





# HARDTAILS GO SOFT

*Forget Blur, TFI Friday and Tony Blair... the softtail is the 90's retro comeback of choice*

Softtail mountain bikes last excited this magazine some two decades ago with their smooth rides, but now the flexible hardtail is making something of a comeback. In May, BMC launched its Teamelite with a seatstay elastomer damper, and now Trek

has revealed its new Procaliber carbon-fibre hardtail with a remarkable flexy seat tube for added comfort and pedalling performance when seated.

Big in the 90s, the softtail offers a bit of give at the rear end without adding too much weight and

complexity. Today it's all about carbon-fibre, which can be engineered to be flexible, strong and light.

Trek and BMC are promising all the pedalling efficiency of a lightweight hardtail with some of the comfort and grip of a full-susser.



Trek Procaliber: 71 per cent more compliance than a carbon hardtail

## TREK PROCALIBER

First there was the Stache 29+ bike from Trek, which has shock-absorbing supersized tyres. Now there's the Procaliber, the hardtail that thinks it's a full-suspension bike, squishing out up to 11mm of vertical flex through the seat tube.

The system is called IsoSpeed Decoupler because the seat tube and down tube are detached from one another. They're still connected by two bearings and a bushing, but you can see the seat tube flexing under your weight if you push down on the saddle (watch at [po.st/procaliber](http://po.st/procaliber)).

Pedal efficiency remains undiminished, but it doesn't give any extra compliance when you're standing up (unlike the BMC). The

additional comfort is only perceptible when you're sitting down.

So does it work? Trek says it has 71 per cent more vertical compliance than a regular carbon hardtail, and it's definitely noticeable from the saddle — we found it helped when trying to lay the power down over washboard trails.

However, with the three-bike range starting at £2,250, it's hardly technology for the masses...yet. IsoSpeed has now trickled down to the aluminium frames in Trek's road bike range, drastically reducing the price, and this would be an obvious direction for its mountain bikes too.

**Procaliber 9.9 SL £6,000**



## BMC TEAMELITE

BMC's softtail system is called Micro Travel Technology and works slightly differently to Trek's: the seatstays have an elastomer damper built into them that lets the back of the bike flex vertically by 15mm. This means the bike will provide some damping when you're sat down pedalling, and also when you're stood up and descending. There are three different damping 'tunes' available, for heavier or lighter riders.

Micro Travel: elastomer enabled back-end flex



# CRYSTAL CLEAR VISION

Three ways to keep your eyes clear of mud and wind

## GOOGLES AND ENDURO HELMET

Goggles offer maximum protection from flying crud, sealing off half your face from the elements. The extra coverage also means contact lens-users can ride without fear of grit in the eye — 100 per cent makes our current favourite tinted lens (£44.99, decade-europe.com). The look's not for everyone, though, so keep them for uplift days or Alpine riding.

### LOOK OUT FOR...

Pair your goggles with a dedicated enduro helmet (or full-face) and you get little clips to hold the stretchy strap in place, or even hold it snugly to the back of your helmet when you're not wearing them.

## BIG GLASSES

Cooler than goggles and way less 'enduro', glasses are the eye protection of choice for most of us. The biggest we've found are Adidas's Evil Eye Evo — they feel great, and offer maximum protection (£164.99, adidas.com). The new Tifosi Elder glasses are superb too (£89.99, zyro.co.uk). If you wear corrective lenses then your best approach is to get a dedicated prescription lens for riding too — try eyepod.net or optilabs.com

### LOOK OUT FOR...

Get multiple lens options — clear for murky winter conditions, light tint for the mountains. Forget fashion and go for maximum coverage with wrap-around lenses.

## MUDGUARD

Try riding without glasses in dry conditions — you might even end up seeing more as there will be nothing to mist up in front of you. Take the eye protection to the front wheel instead and fit a good mudguard to save your eyes when you hit that rogue puddle. The Powa Dfender is pricey but very robust and really wraps the wheel (£49.99, powa-products.com).

### LOOK OUT FOR...

Forget about the back wheel — mud can't get to your eyes from there. Instead, get a good front guard and make sure it moves with the wheel and doesn't fix to the static part of the fork.



Slime shady: protect your eyes from trail muck

3  
OF THE  
BEST

TRAIL  
PACKS

## CAMELBAK VOLT 13 LR

£99.99 zyro.co.uk

Camelbak has redesigned the reservoir for its Volt, making it lower and more compact to your body for extra stability. It's comfy and well organised with internal compartments.



## MAVIC CROSSMAX HYDROPACK 15

£110 mavic.co.uk

The Crossmax does everything well — it's solidly made, has good straps that are well padded and comfy and the pockets and main compartment are decent too. Best of all, the Hydrapak reservoir is excellent.



## OSPREY RAPTOR 14

£90 ospreyeurope.com

With the best reservoir on the market for £90 and a really well thought out pack design, the Raptor is impressive. We love the innovative pull-out tool wrap to aid trailside repairs.





# SPECIALIZED GETS THE GOLD STANDARD

*Öhlins and Specialized partner up to offer the new STX22 air shock*

The distinctive yellow coils of steel that wrap around Öhlins's dampers have been making select appearances on Specialized's gravity bikes for a couple of seasons now. And as good as its TTX coil shocks are, there's no escaping the weight penalty that comes with a steel spring.

Enter the new STX22. It's the first air-sprung damper that Öhlins has produced for Specialized, and it will be standard spec on 2016 Enduro Expert level bikes and above. The claimed weight is 380g, and that puts it right in the ballpark with other piggyback shocks such as the RockShox Monarch Plus and Fox Float X2.

The biggest weight saving, other than the air spring, comes from switching to a simple, single-tube

damper instead of the classic twin-tube design. And if Öhlins has managed to maintain its legendary damping on the new STX22, it will be a total game-changer on the Enduro.

For existing Enduro owners lusting after the STX22, it will be available separately from Specialized dealers for £499.99.

Standard spec on 2016 Enduro Expert and above, or separately for £499

Specialized brings custom tuning and AutoSag to the partnership

Single tube damper saves weight and space over Öhlins's twin-tube design

Three on-the-fly high-speed compression settings, plus low-speed rebound and compression adjustment



## ORANGE HARVEST

Matching the colour of your collar and cuffs, or in this case your calipers to your top cap, is important, right? Hope reckons so. Although the Lancashire machining maestros have been making components in a range of colours for years now, one notable exception from the rainbow has been orange. Now it's sussed out how to make the colour last the test of time, there's a new orange crankset, headset, spacers and top cap, stem, seat clamp and E4 brake (caliper and lever body). Anyone owning an orange Orange will be doubly pleased. [hopetech.com](http://hopetech.com)



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# HOT STUFF

WHAT WE'RE EXCITED ABOUT THIS MONTH



**MOST  
WANTED**

## FABRIC CAGELESS WATER BOTTLE £11.99

Fabric's radical new water bottle does away with the need for a bottle cage and mounts directly to the frame using two lightweight studs. The system has lots of advantages — first of all, the studs only weigh 1.5g each, and with a lightweight carbon cage weighing 25g and an aluminium one up to 40g, the weight saving is dramatic. It also looks a lot nicer and neater, which was the primary driver for Fabric. It reckons if you've spent thousands on a bike it's a shame to spoil the

lines with something as ugly as a bottle cage.

The really innovative thing about the Fabric bottle is the way it engages with the studs. Fabric says it wasn't possible to make a bottle that is stiff enough to grip the studs, yet flexible enough to drink from — so to make it work, it sonic-welded stiffer plastic inserts onto the slots on the bottom of the bottle, which increased stiffness, improved the fit and reduced rattle. In tests Fabric found the design was also more secure than a

traditional cage and bottle system, which makes it ideal for off-road use. It's also a great solution where space is limited because you have to move the bottle far less to unclip it. It'll be perfect for small-sized suspension bikes.

Currently Fabric is only offering the bottle in 600ml but you do get two sets of studs. A larger 750ml bottle is planned and Fabric is also working on an aero bottle, an insulated bottle and some sort of clip-on tool using the same mounts. [fabric.cc](http://fabric.cc)

Why has no one  
thought of  
this before?







### HEATSEEKER

Stay cool this summer with Sugoi's new RSX jersey. It's made from a revolutionary Icefill material that reacts to moisture, pulling it instantly away from your body. S-XXL sizes and white or blue colours. **£59.99, sugoi.com**



### ROCK N ROLL

Aimed at enduro/XC crossover, Nukeproof's new Lite kneepad is a pull-on design with a three-quarter cut. Silicone inside to hold them up, Kevlar on the outside to resist abrasion. S-XL sizes. **£39.99, hotlines-uk.com**



### CRUMPLE ZONE

The ConeHead technology in 7iDP's new M2 helmet is composed of a dual-density foam — one half lightweight, the other shock-absorbing. The M2 also features an adjustable visor and comes in six natty colours. **£59.99, decade-europe.com**



### TOUCH SENSITIVE

If you can't resist the urge to tweet mid-ride then you'll need Race Face's new Stage glove. It has a touchscreen-compatible pad on the middle finger with a super thin palm and breathable mesh back. Lime, black, orange. **£29.95, silverfish-uk.com**



### AGENT SHIELD

This is a new addition to Mudhugger's fork-mounted mudguard range. Called the FR (Front Race), it's designed for enduro/XC and as such gets a longer front extension with increased splatter protection. **£23, themudhugger.co.uk**



### BACK IN BLACK

Mitas is the new name for Rubena tyres, and it has a massive range including both an XC and Extreme series. The Kratos shown has a lug in both camps and is available in 2.25in and 2.45in, in all wheel sizes. **£39.99, mitascycle.co.uk**



### EVIL WALKS

Sock Guy makes some of the best riding socks in the world — great fit, long in the cuff, hard wearing, and killer value. There are also hundreds of designs, including this 'Day of the Dead' inspired El Dia Crew. S-M, L-XL sizes. **£9.99, silverfish-uk.com**



### STIFF UPPER LIP

If you struggle fitting tyres, this new lever from UK firm ProForm should help. It's heavy-duty, has unique tyre loosening and fitting features and even comes with a clip that holds the tyre in place as you work. **£9.99, upgradebikes.co.uk**



### BUDGET BLEEDERS

A new range of bleed kits for the most popular disc brake brands. Each kit includes high-pressure syringes and is available in standard or premium versions. Available for Avid, Shimano and Formula disc brakes. **£9.99, leveretproductions.com**



# LET THE TRAIN TAKE THE STRAIN

*Don't have a car? No problem! You can still get to some top-notch singletrack by train*



## THE BLORENGE, BRECON BEACONS 16km (10 miles)



HIGH



TECHY



ROCKY

A cracking big-mountain route. From Abergavenny station, head towards town and take cycle path west alongside the Usk, then beneath the A465 to Llanfoist. Take the Community Path that leads W into the Clydach Gorge (Landranger 160/ SO286132). At the Forge car park, follow lanes WSW onto the foot of Gilwern Hill (SO236140). Go S then descend E then S to the Punchbowl. Follow the canal to Llanfoist.

**GPS download:** po.st/ Blorenge

## GLEN FINGLASS, SCOTLAND 57km (35 miles)



ROCKY



LONG



BOGGY

A massive expedition that's best saved for a good day. Take the West Highland Way N from Tyndrum (Landranger 50/ NN328306) to Bridge of Orchy and take the road to the western end of Loch Tulla. Cross Victoria Bridge then follow the path signed to Loch Etive. Cross the bridge at Ardmaddy Bay and head SW to cross Glen Noe and continue through woodland to the A85. Hard R at Taynuilt station, and a train back to Tyndrum.

**GPS download:** po.st/ finglass

## POLE BANK, LONG MYND 26km (16 miles)



SINGLE-TRACK



BIG CLIMB

This is a sweet little blast that starts almost at Church Stretton station (Landranger 137/ SO455935). Head up High Street and onto the ridge via Carding Mill. Follow tracks SW over Pole Bank and the road to the gliding club. Drop down Minton Batch, take the road to Hamperley and climb to the Shropshire Way. Now head N to the car park S of Pole Cott and take the footpath (permissive BW) SE over Round Hill and down.

**GPS download:** po.st/ PoleBank

## WEPHAM DOWN, SOUTH DOWNS 12km (14 miles)



HARD NAV

Train access to the South Downs isn't as easy as it looks — the main artery runs S of the hills. But Amberley is well placed and you can run E or W from here. Head S from the station (Landranger 197/ TQ025118) to North Stoke, E onto Camp Hill and S to Wepham. Continue up into Wepham Woods until you reach the lane that leads N over Blackpatch Hill and on to the South Downs Way. Head W.

**GPS download:** po.st/ Wepham

## THE RAILWAY CODE

*Manage your expectations to enjoy your trip...*

**1** Rule number one: never, ever try to take your bike on the train between the hours of 6am and midday, or 2pm and midnight. Those times are reserved for commuters and the elderly. The train companies appreciate the inconvenience this causes, but hey, they don't make the rules! Any suggestion that bikes take up space and cut profits is absurd.

**2** Now you know where you stand as the most despised of rail passengers, it's time to board. By a strange quirk of physics, people with bikes become invisible when trying to board a train. It's not that the other passengers are pushing in front as you patiently wait, it's just they really can't see you. Know your place.

**3** If you're lucky enough to now be inside a train with a section for bikes, welcome aboard. Don't get too excited though, as the 'bike bay' is really just part of the toilet carriage. Hopefully you won't mind — at least the constant traffic of people crunching their luggage into your beautiful bike will distract you from the smell.

**4** You've reached your destination, but leaving a train carriage is harder than leaving earth's orbit. People are bound to board the train before you can exit. The muddy frame and gleaming chainring teeth can be used to persuade people to move eventually, and out you'll pop like the contents of an overflowing train toilet.





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# BOOST YOUR BALANCE

*On-bike balance is key to every single skill and move on the trails, but it's overlooked and under-practised — try our three ways to trail equilibrium*

## 1 SLOW IT DOWN

Speed on the trail can mask gaps in your skills, so take it away and practise the balance basics. Then when you return to speed, you'll find yourself riding with more control and accuracy. Find a car park with painted bay lines and ride along them as slowly as you can without putting a foot down, track-standing or using the brakes. Pay attention to your body position — try moving your body from the hips, from the front to the rear of the bike and see what the effects are. Find your ideal balance point. The slower you go the more exaggerated your body movements will be, but don't be afraid to stick a leg, elbow or tongue out to help you stabilise.

## 2 CORNER CONTROL

Use a stretch of quiet cul-de-sac and try weaving between the broken centre lines down the middle. No quiet road? Set out a few little obstacles in the car park to practise on. The idea is to get used to the feeling of moving your bike from one edge of the tyres to the other, while keeping your body upright. Start off as slow as you can, and only gradually increase the speed to make it harder. You're doing it wrong if the tyres start to lose traction — the point is to flip quickly and accurately between perfect traction on the left side of your tyres, and perfect traction on the right.

Practise till it becomes second nature.

## 3 TAKE IT TO THE TRAIL

Forget Strava and KoMs, and pick a technical downhill trail you often ride and slow it all right down. The lack of speed will force you to use your balance and concentrate on riding as smooth as possible, taking perfect lines and gaining the maximum grip you can from the tyres. Now try the same thing on a technical climb — not only will you be concentrating on the best use of your strength, you'll also be looking for the path of least resistance rather than using pure power to overcome obstacles.

For the final step, go back and gradually ramp up the speed, still concentrating on those slow skills.



# ROADTRIP RETREATS

**Big weekend away on the bike? Here are the best motorway services for mountain bikers, rated by Which? and mbr**

## 1 TEBAY SERVICES, CUMBRIA (M6)

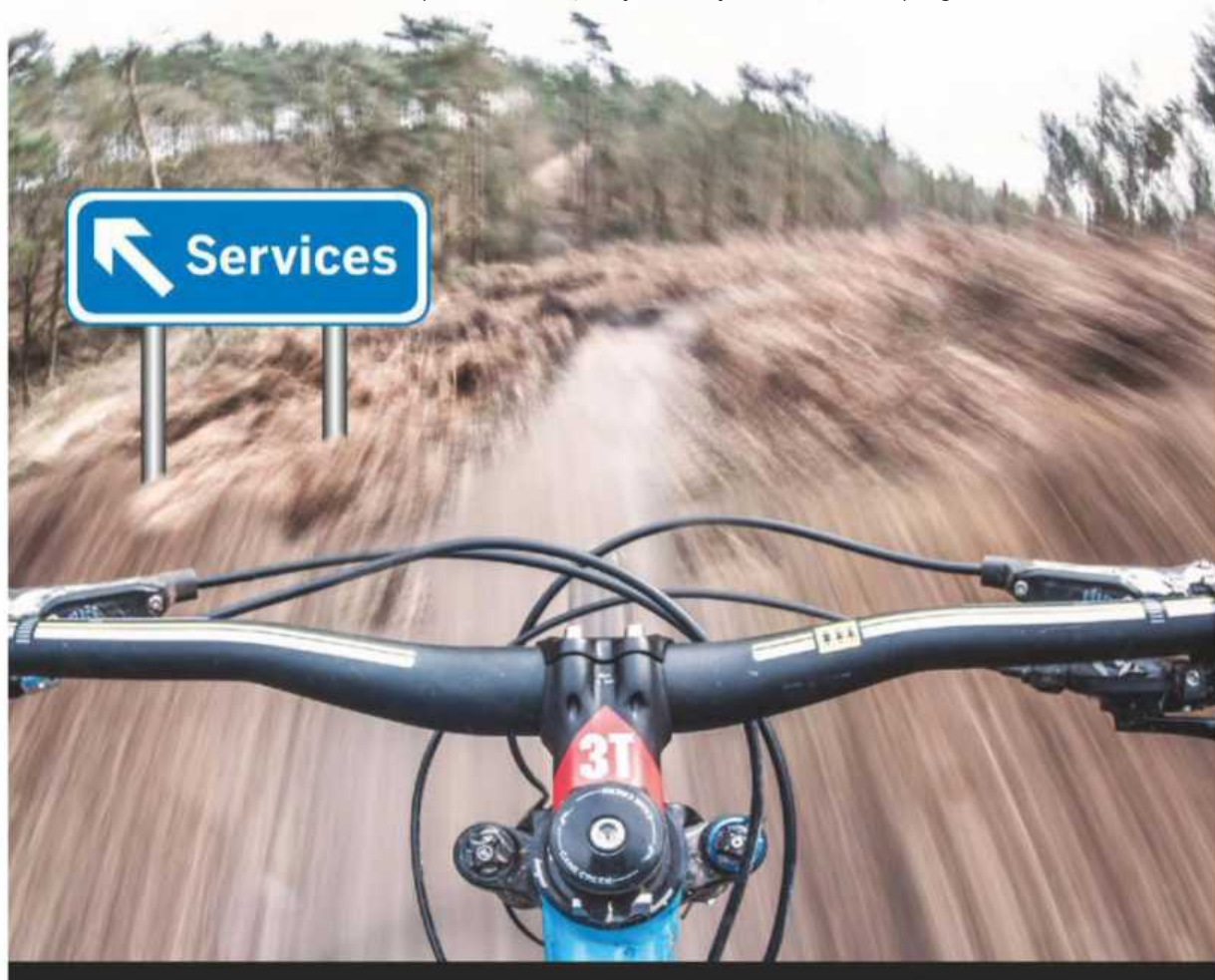
The only place to stop if you're heading to the Lakes, Tebay has amazing food in portions big enough for a day in the mountains, and great views while you eat too.

## 2 WETHERBY, NORTH YORKSHIRE (A1M)

Gateway to the Yorkshire Dales and North York Moors, Wetherby services is brand new, has decent food (M&S Food, Costa and West Cornwall Pasty Co) and boasts posh showers too, ready for muddy riders.

## 3 COBHAM, SURREY (M25)

With a big Food Court (we can't get enough of the tasty burritos from El Mexicana), nearly-new Cobham services isn't an unpleasant place to be, especially if you retreat to its lakeside terrace and landscaped grounds.



# SOUL FOOD

**New American sports nutrition drinks hit the mark for mountain bikers**

We like the sound of this little sports drink brand from the US — not just a cool name, it also makes sports drinks with a conscience. Gnarly's whey protein supplement for post-ride recovery is made from milk, just like all whey products, but this one comes from New Zealand grass-fed and humanely-managed cattle. Gnarly says that makes it clean of hormones, antibiotics and pesticides, and tastes better too. There's a Vegan Feast recovery drink as well, made from pea, chia and cranberry. They're not cheap though, at around £40 a tub plus delivery.

[gognarly.com](http://gognarly.com)







# HOW TO BEAT CRAMP

*You're in the car, driving home from a great day's ride, when searing pain rips its way up your leg. Sound familiar? We look at the science of stopping cramp*

Let's get the bad news out the way first: there is apparently no proven way to prevent cramp, and nobody even really knows what it is or what causes it. So while all manner of people on social media will tell you to drink electrolytes and try training to cover more miles, Dr Kevin Miller from Central

Michigan University tells us that really won't help. The good Doc looked at over 60 scientific articles conducted between 1955 and 2008 and found no experimental evidence for either theory.

Eating mustard won't help (who'd have guessed!), and nor will posture, the weather or salty crisps.

What does work then? Doc Miller concluded that cramp probably doesn't arise because of any single cause, but is due to several factors combined. So the best approach is to treat cramping with the one weapon that has been proven to be effective: stretching.

## THREE STRETCHES THAT REALLY WORK

### DOWNWARD DOG

This pose opens the shoulders and lengthens the hamstrings.

#### HOW TO DO IT

- Begin on all fours, tuck toes under and begin to straighten legs, pushing sit bones to the sky.
- Bend one knee at a time to begin with to wake up your hamstrings.
- Hold for five-10 breaths, letting head hang loosely and focusing on releasing heels to the ground.



### CAMEL POSE

The reverse of the forward-leaning, crouched position often adopted by bikers, stretching the hip flexors and opening the chest.

#### HOW TO DO IT

- Begin kneeling with toes hooked under and bring hand to lower back.
- Keeping hips over knees, slowly lean back, keeping shoulders down.
- If you want to work deeper, bring hands to rest on heels and let head hang back.
- Hold for five-10 breaths, bring hands to lower back, and come back to kneeling.



### TRIANGLE POSE

This is a great stretch for the hamstrings and the hip flexors. It also requires lateral movement of the spine and rotation from the core — two movement planes often neglected in biking.

#### HOW TO DO IT

- Stand with feet about 1m apart and spread arms parallel to floor.
- Turn front (right) foot out 90 degrees and back (left) foot in 30 degrees.
- Inhale and reach across to right, bending from hip not waist.
- Exhale and bring right hand down to shin, ankle or foot, and left arm up to sky, looking to fingertips of your top hand.
- Hold for 5-10 breaths, lengthening spine with each inhalation, and turning chest to sky with each exhalation.
- Come back to centre on an inhale and repeat on other leg.





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# THE TRAVEL DEBATE

*Does lots of suspension mean lots of fun, or is a short-travel bike the ultimate grin-grower?*

## BIG IS BEAUTIFUL

DANNY MILNER, MBR STAFFER

No one needs a 2.5-ton behemoth boasting 370hp, a multi-touchscreen infotainment system and the ability to park itself, but that doesn't stop nearly every school-run mum around my way owning such an obnoxious vehicle. Why? Because they provide a feeling of safety and security and, against all the odds, modern technology and engineering has also made them pretty damned good at pottering down to Waitrose.

There has been a similar trend in mountain biking. Competition breeds innovation, and it's no coincidence that the explosion in enduro racing has taken the 160mm-travel bike to staggering new heights. Heights that make these bikes more versatile than ever before, to the point where — unless you live somewhere pan-flat — they are now viable all-rounders. Thanks to advances in carbon and aluminium frame production, and lightweight, durable components, many of these bikes weigh less than 30lb. Sophisticated dampers have helped make them pedal as efficiently as the average trail bike, and modern geometry means they climb almost as well as they descend.

But probably the most convincing argument for consolidating your fleet into a single enduro bike is that the trails we ride have evolved to keep pace with the equipment. New bike parks are opening across the country every year, and the existing ones are flourishing. There are challenging new locals-built zones popping up here, there and everywhere (and some of them are even sanctioned!). There's no lack of terrain on which to test these astonishing bikes.

Anyone want to buy my old short-travel 29er?



## LESS IS MORE

JAMIE DARLOW, MBR STAFFER

There are a host of true but tedious reasons why short-travel bikes are more appropriate for the riding most of us do (or, mountain biking, as I like to call it). Those dreary arguments include, but are not limited to: the cheaper cost of small bikes, their easier suspension set-up, your faster uphill pedalling speed and the more versatile nature of a short-travel set-up — trail centres, natural epics and pub crawls are all appropriate and you can ride the thing all day.

But none of those truisms cut to the heart of why short-travel beats big travel: quite simply, the ride feels better when you're closer to the edge. We ride mountain bikes to engage with that primitive part of ourselves that demands we take risks and get away with it, with adrenaline and endorphins giving us our natural fix.

And the thing is, that's actually easier and safer on a short-travel bike where there's a little less grip on the downhills. On a big-travel bike, you need a lot more confidence and skill to get to the edge of control and you need to be going faster too — which is all the worse if you come off. It's the feeling of speed that counts, not the raw numbers... If it was about the mph, we'd all be riding road bikes.



Illustration: Simon Scarsbrook



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# DOING THE DOUBLE

Conquered after 55 non-stop hours of riding: the South Downs Way Double Double — 390 miles and 48,000ft of climbing

## THE RIDER

### ROB COLLIVER

Rob is the first person to complete the South Downs Way Double Double — there, back, there and back again — in a near non-stop off-road ride of almost 400 miles, lasting more than two whole days and nights.

Apart from the pedalling, Rob had to open every gate himself. Occasional riders joined him, particularly during the final 20 miles.

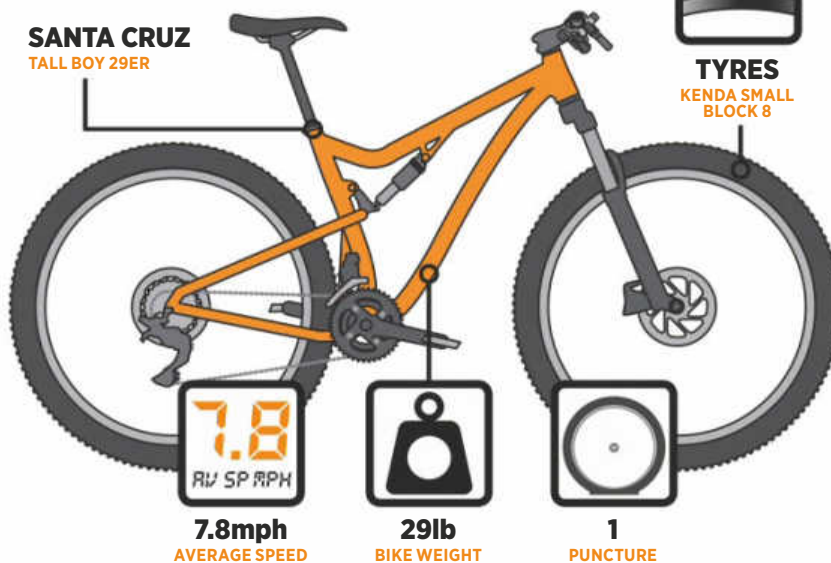
Rob used to run a trailer-building company on Hayling Island, near Portsmouth, before he took up ultra-endurance mountain biking. Now aged 50, he's completed some of the world's toughest events, including The Great Divide (see How Far is Too Far? **mbr** May 2015) and the Yukon 1000 kayak race.

Could anybody beat this extraordinary achievement? What would Rob do if someone rode the South Downs Way five times? "I'd do it 10 times," he says. And he probably would.



## THE BIKE

### SANTA CRUZ TALL BOY 29ER



## THE FUEL



**34**  
PROTEIN SHAKES



**16**  
BANANAS



**10**  
PAINKILLERS



**15**  
TORTILLA WRAPS

## THE ROUTE

### WINCHESTER



**55hr 5min**  
TOTAL TIME



**352**  
GATES OPENED

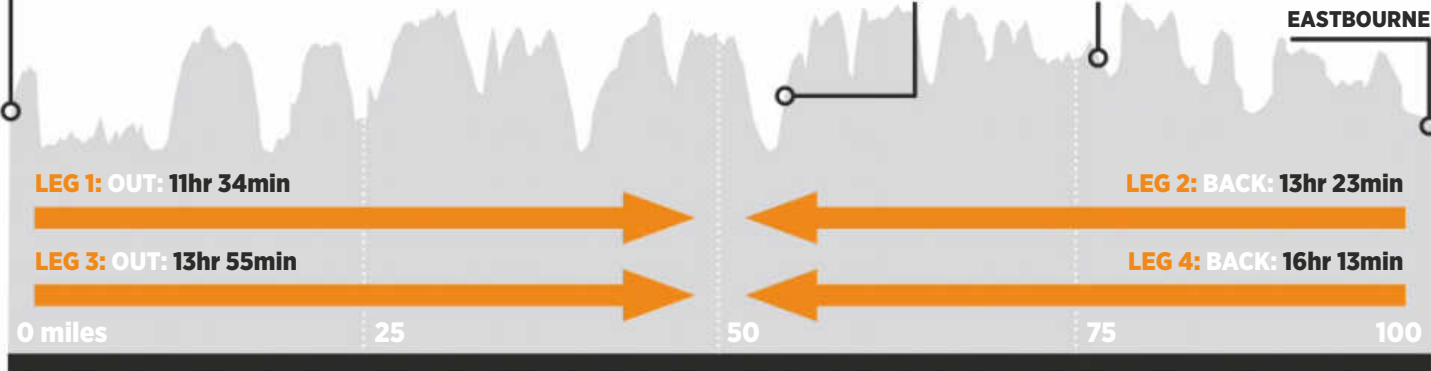


**48,938ft**  
TOTAL CLIMBING



**390**  
TOTAL MILES

### EASTBOURNE



## THE OTHER 'WAYS'

You've heard of the South Downs Way and West Highland Way — here's the best of the rest

### THE ICKNIELD WAY, CHILTERN HILLS

This ancient trackway linking Norfolk and Wiltshire doesn't make for exciting mountain biking, but the singletrack branching off it really does: smooth, flowy and fast. Try our route, GPS download: [po.st/icknield](http://po.st/icknield)

### PENNINE BRIDLEWAY

Covering 205 miles, the Pennine Bridleway slices the Peak District neatly in half and covers some of our favourite riding destinations in the National Park and in Yorkshire — Buxton, Hayfield, Hebden Bridge and more, meaning you could turn this Way into a full-blown epic.

### HANS 'NO WAY' REY

A bit of a wildcard in this panel but worth a mention anyway. Pioneer trials and freerider, and long-time resident of the Mountain Bike Hall of Fame, Hansie has built trails across the world, brought charity bikes to Africa and starred in dozens of films (check out [Resetfilms.co.uk](http://Resetfilms.co.uk) and 'Skye and Torridon').



# Hi, five



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# 5 MUST-WATCH MTB FILMS

*A handful of the most exciting and influential films in mountain bike history*

## WON'T BACK DOWN: THE STEVE PEAT STORY

Not all mountain bike films are American, and *Won't Back Down* is as British as they come, documenting legendary downhill star Steve Peat's career and his quest to become downhill mountain biking world champion. We are privy to the highs and lows of this brutal and fast-paced sport through the eyes of the most successful (and down-to-earth) man in the business. Expect old footage, Lycra and memorable moments from Rob Warner, Peaty and the early days of downhill.

**BEST BIT:** The elusive World Championship win in Canberra, Australia

[wontbackdownfilm.com](http://wontbackdownfilm.com), £9.99

## WHERE THE TRAIL ENDS

With the biggest drops and jumps, ridden by the biggest names from Redbull Rampage, *WTE* is one of the best mountain biking films ever. The cinematography is slick and polished, and the soundtrack is spot-on too. And then there's the riding — jaw-dropping, inspiring and frightening, including an insight into what back-country riding is about for some of the best riders in the world.

**BEST BIT:** The ridge-wline opening sequence, which perfectly mixes stunning images, music and riding. [wherethetrailends.com](http://wherethetrailends.com), £9.99



## STRENGTH IN NUMBERS

Compared to *Where the Trail Ends*, *Strength in Numbers* is slightly more eclectic in nature and features all manner of different off-road riding — it does a good job of showing how inclusive mountain biking is, and makes us feel warm and fuzzy inside. It's a good watch for the riding too — Gee Atherton at the World Cup, Brandon Semenuk riding deep loam and Graham Agassiz hitting jumps through *Star Wars* style trees.

**BEST BIT:** The sequences filmed at Fort William with Gee Atherton. [anthillfilms.com](http://anthillfilms.com), £9.99



## NEW WORLD DISORDER

*NWD* is where freeriding movies began; filmed back in 2000, the resolution is pretty poor and there are no zipwire or helicam angles to dazzle us. That doesn't seem to matter though, because there's real passion in this edit, and watching Josh Bender hurl himself off cliffs on an inappropriate bike will never get old. Expect loud music, baggy jeans and huge hucking.

**BEST BIT:** The 'Jaw Drop' in Kamloops, Canada; a 55ft cliff sent by freeride pioneer Josh Bender: "Life's too short not to go big, man!" [po.st/nwd1](http://po.st/nwd1)



## THE RIDGE

The eponymous ridge here is the Cuillin Ridge on the Isle of Skye — a jagged spine of sharp rocks, complete with perilous drops to either side, which is impossible to ride... unless you're Danny MacAskill, the greatest trials rider of his generation. It's a delight to watch, terrifying at the top of the ridge, mesmerising on the way back down and shake-your-head bonkers as he front flips that fence at the end.

**BEST BIT:** When the camera pulls away and the 'ridge' is revealed for the first time. [po.st/theridge](http://po.st/theridge), £free





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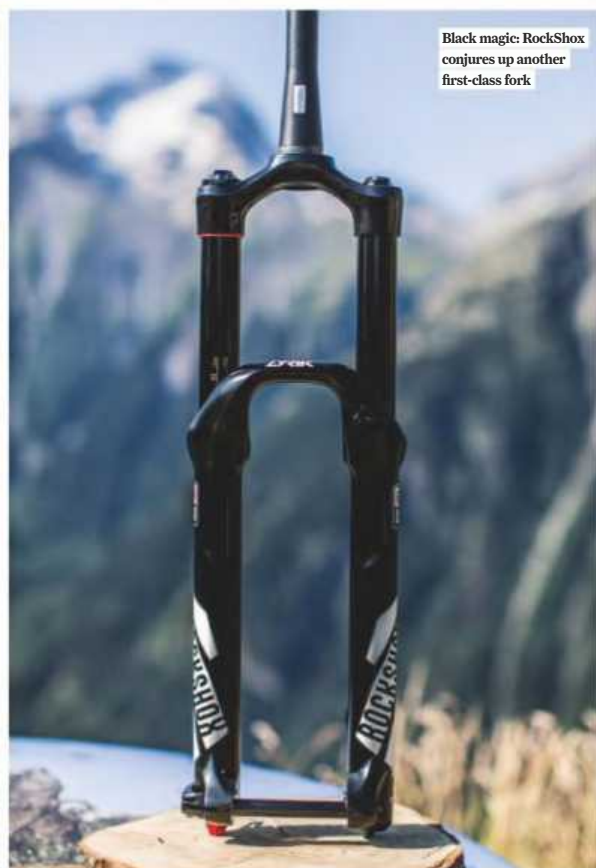


# First rides

SWINGING A LEG OVER WHAT'S HOT THIS MONTH

## ROCKSHOX LYRIK RCT3 SOLO AIR

£824.00 / 27.5in/29in / [fisheroutdoor.co.uk](http://fisheroutdoor.co.uk)



Black magic: RockShox conjures up another first-class fork

### NEED TO KNOW

- New long-travel enduro fork
- 27.5in version with 160-180mm travel, 29er options 150 or 160mm
- Boost options are also available where the 29in Boost fork doubles as 27.5in Plus option
- New Solo Air spring with improved small bump sensitivity
- Torque Caps on the hub improve stiffness with standard 15mm Maxle

*The new Lyrik from RockShox has been likened to the Pike, but here we find out that it's a far greater catch...*

It's easy to take one look at the new Lyrik and declare that it's just a pumped-up Pike. And, in some ways it is. To begin with, it's got 35mm upper tubes, just like the Pike. The old Lyrik had 20mm dropouts, the new version gets the lighter 15mm Maxle, just like the Pike. And the similarities don't stop there. Internally the Lyrik sports a Charger damper and comes with the option of a Solo Air or Dual Position Air springs, just like the Pike.

It's what you can't see that really sets the Lyrik apart. For instance, the 35mm upper tubes are thicker, to boost stiffness. This is why RockShox had to use slightly smaller Bottomless Tokens in the Lyrik. To distinguish them from the Pike versions, they are grey instead of red. The fork crown is also deeper, again to improve stiffness and handle the extra leverage imposed by the 180mm travel option.

At the opposite end of the fork, the dropouts have larger inner surfaces that mate perfectly with the 31mm oversized hub end caps, for extra stiffness. It's not a new concept; Specialized used 28mm end caps to boost steering precision on quick-release forks, but RockShox has upped the stakes to 31mm and branded it Torque Cap Compatible. Initially the oversized end caps will only be available

Sealed deal: a single wipe keeps the oil in and the dirt out







The Lyrik: effortless excitement exacerbation at Les Deux Alpes



Torque Cap Capability yields optimum steering precision



New Lyrik Bottomless Tokens for Solo Air (L) and Dual Position (R)

for SRAM hubs, but the dropouts are fully compatible with all current 15mm hubs, you just won't benefit from the stiffness gains.

Making the Lyrik stiffer than the Pike is only one small part of the story; friction has also been reduced. Previously, RockShox used separate oil and wiper seals, but it has now partnered up with SKF to produce a single seal that keeps oil in and dirt out.

The biggest improvement on the Lyrik, however, is the new Solo Air spring. RockShox has taken the stronger negative spring that it developed for the DebonAir cans on its

## The Lyrik is not only stiffer than the Pike but friction has also been reduced

rear shocks and adapted it for use in the fork. Obviously this improves small bump sensitivity, but more importantly, it allows you to run higher spring pressures without the fork ever feeling as though it's topping out. This in turn means you can use the spring for better support without the need for lots of Bottomless Tokens. In fact, the 170mm travel fork that I rode in Les Deux Alpes only had one grey Bottomless Token fitted and the fork never felt divey, even though all of the trails I rode were super-steep and I spent a fair amount of time riding the brakes. The trails were rough as old boots too, but after three days my hands were still in good shape.

Based on my first few days on the Lyrik, I can confidently say that it's better than the Pike, and the 200g weight increase is a small price to pay for the extra confidence. The real question is... can it outperform the Fox 36? Maybe it's time for another head to head test!

Alan Muldoon



Slick wiper seals made in association with SKF

### SPECIFICATION

**Wheel size options** 27.5in or 29in/27.5 Plus  
**Axles** 15x100mm or 15x110mm Boost  
**Travel** 160, 170, 180mm in 27.5in and 150, 160mm in 29in/27.5 Plus  
**Upper Tubes** 35mm Fast Black coating  
**Damper** Charger RCT3  
**Springs** Solo Air or Dual Position Air  
**Colours** Diffusion Black  
**Weights** 2,005g (27.5in), 2,032g (29in)



### mbr 1ST IMPRESSION

#### ✓ HIGHS

Increased stiffness and improved control over Pike. The new Solo Air spring provides more support and Bottomless Tokens are now available for the Dual Position Air forks. RockShox will also offer a Charger upgrade kit for the old 26in Lyrik.

#### ✗ LOWS

Currently the Torque Caps are only available for SRAM hubs.



# KONA HONZO AL DL

£1,799 / 29in / [konaworld.com](http://konaworld.com)

*Lighter and more agile than the original, the aluminium Honzo has a whole new attitude*

## SPECIFICATION

**Frame** 6061 butted aluminium  
**Fork** Fox 34 Float Performance FIT, 120mm travel  
**Wheels** Shimano/Novatech hubs, WTB STp 129 TCS Tubeless rims, Maxxis Minion DHF/Crossmark TR 29x2.3/2.25in tyres  
**Drivetrain** Race Face Aeffect crank, Shimano Deore shifter and r-mech  
**Brakes** Shimano Deore 180/160mm  
**Components** Kona  
**Weight** 12.4kg (27.33lb)  
**Sizes** S, M, L, XL

## GEOMETRY

**Size ridden** L  
**Rider height** 5ft 10in  
**Head angle** 68°  
**Seat angle** 75°  
**BB height** 306mm  
**Chainstay** 415mm  
**Front centre** 745mm  
**Wheelbase** 1,152mm  
**Down tube** 740mm  
**Top tube** 631mm  
**Reach** 460mm

## NEED TO KNOW

- Aluminium version of Kona's agro hardtail
- Ultra-short chainstays
- Single ring only

**W**e tested the Kona Honzo, in its original steel guise, just over two years ago, and it brought back happy memories of sunny days spent mucking around on dirt jump bikes. At last, here was a 29er that could do more than just rattle off the miles. Sadly, it was also overweight, under-g geared and punishing on rough terrain.

For 2016, the Honzo has abandoned its ferrous roots, making the move to butted 6061 aluminium instead, and lost nearly a kilo in the process. There's also a slightly shorter head tube, marginally longer reach, and the old slotted dropouts with adjustable chainstay length have been canned. Other than that, the geometry remains true to the original — that means ultra-short chainstays,

acres of standover clearance and a heel-scraping BB height.

To spread the costs of developing the new frame, the front triangle is shared with the new Kahuna — Kona's race hardtail. This not only underlines the extensive weight savings, but also indicates how Kona has adopted a more trail-worthy geometry for its XC rippers. Where the Kahuna differs from the Honzo, aside from spec, are 25mm longer chainstays and compatibility with a double chainset. Such extensive overlap actually creates options; racers who like short chainstays could buy the Honzo, and if you're a tall trail rider wanting a more balanced weight distribution, you could opt for the Kahuna.

The move to aluminium has brought a couple of significant changes to the way the Honzo rides. Firstly, all the weight saving manifests itself in a more dynamic attitude that does your bidding with far less muscle. It's still a sweet handling hardtail — one that's entertaining to sling into a series of switchbacks, throw down a steep chute and launch off a pack of jumps — but thanks to the reduced mass it's now a lot more willing to change direction, accelerate out of turns and leave the ground.

On the other hand, it's even more brutal at the back end than the old steel bike.



Tight back end means single-ring only

Expect aching calf muscles, sore feet and loose fillings as a consequence.

If you're already a Honzo fan, you'll be aware of this unforgiving nature. In which case, you'll probably love the more dynamic handling. Call us wusses, but we could only cope with it in small doses.

Danny Milner



Ultra-short chainstays lend agile handling

## mbr 1ST IMPRESSION



### HIGHS

Big weight saving over the old Honzo. More fun to ride as a result.



### LOWS

Aluminium frame takes no prisoners. Lost a little of its hipster cred with the move from steel.





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# ORBEA OCCAM AM M-LTD

£5,679 / 650b / Orbea.com

*Spanish flier with trail credentials to match its stunning good looks*



## SPECIFICATION

**Frame** OMR carbon, 140mm  
**Shock** Fox Float Factory DPS Evol  
**Fork** Fox 34 Float Factory FIT4, 140mm travel  
**Wheels** DT Swiss Spline 27 XMC-1200 TLR, Maxxis High Roller II 3C/Ardent 3C 27.5x2.4/2.25in tyres  
**Drivetrain** Race Face Next SL crank, Shimano XTR shifters and mechs (28t single ring included)  
**Brakes** Shimano XTR Trail  
**Components** Race Face Next bar 760mm, Turbine stem, RockShox Reverb Stealth seatpost  
**Weight** 10.97kg (24.2lb)  
**Sizes** S, M, L

## GEOMETRY

**Size ridden** L  
**Rider height** 5ft 10in  
**Head angle** 67°  
**Seat angle** 75°  
**BB height** 340mm  
**Chainstay** 425mm  
**Front centre** 748mm  
**Wheelbase** 1,173mm  
**Down tube** 705mm  
**Top tube** 612mm  
**Reach** 450mm

## NEED TO KNOW

- New trail bike from the Spanish brand
- 650b wheels and 140mm travel
- Also available as a 29er with 120mm travel
- Carbon and aluminium frame options with bikes from £1,599

From the moment the sheets were pulled off this brand new Occam, I felt like I'd seen it somewhere before. Now, Orbea may not be alone in sharing a similar shock placement and linkage to Specialized's Stumpjumper and Camber, but few brands have taken this basic layout and turned it into such a spectacular looking chassis. In fact, I'd go so far as to say it looks even better than the Californian brand's latest incarnations. Imitation or inspiration? Honestly, when the end product looks this good, I couldn't care less.

Choice is not something that's lacking with the new Occam range. It's available with either 650b or 29in wheels, the former AM model getting 140mm of travel, 20mm

more than the big-wheel TR version. And while the spotlight at the bike's recent launch inevitably fell on the feather-light full carbon frames, the more affordable entry-level bikes are rendered in equally shapely hydroformed aluminium.

In fact, the Occam's only limiting factor is sizing; the 29er comes in medium, large and extra large, while the 650b range adds a small and omits the XL.

While the silhouette may be instantly familiar, look closely and you'll see that the Occam's suspension layout has a couple of unique features. There's no dropout pivot, for starters — at least not on the carbon bike (the aluminium frames use Orbea's concentric dropout design). Instead, the carbon seatstays flex upwards 25mm at full

travel. It's a design that saves 150g, reduces costs and improves stiffness. Sure, there are additional rebound forces for the damping to control as the stays snap back into position, but it's not something I noticed out on the trail, even with my settings towards the open end of the rebound scale.

The shock is slightly recessed into the top tube, creating more space within the front triangle — sufficient for a water bottle — and allowing for greater standover clearance.

As beautiful as it is, the Occam's performance needs to go more than skin deep if it's to survive in today's cutthroat trail bike market. Fortunately it rides as good as it looks, with a lively, active suspension feel that perfectly complements the dynamic handling. Riding the 29er and the 650b bike back-to-back, it was the smaller wheel AM bike that had the edge in terms of entertainment, so as long as you can find one to fit, that's the model I'd go for.

Danny Milner



A familiar suspension design perfectly executed: the Occam is a real looker

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# LAPIERRE ZESTY XM 527

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*Lapierre's iconic trail bike gets a makeover along with next generation e:i electronic suspension*

## SPECIFICATION

**Frame** Carbon  
OST+ 120mm travel  
**Shock** RockShox  
Monarch RT3 Ei Auto  
**Fork** RockShox  
Revelation RL Solo  
Air, 130mm travel  
**Wheels** Race Face  
Aeffect, Schwalbe  
Nobby Nic 27.5x  
2.25in tyres  
**Drivetrain** Shimano  
XT chainset, f-mech,  
r-mech and shifters  
**Brakes** Shimano XT  
180mm  
**Components** Easton  
EA70 60mm, Vouilloz  
Signature 740mm,  
KS Lev Integra  
**Sizes** S, M, L, XL

## GEOMETRY

**Size ridden** XL  
**Rider height** 6ft 2in  
**Head angle** 67°  
**Seat angle** 74°  
**BB drop** -15mm  
**Chainstay** 430mm  
**Top tube** 750mm  
**Reach** 481mm

## NEED TO KNOW

- All-new Zesty trail bike with 120mm travel
- Longer top tubes, wider bars and shorter stems for improved fit and control
- Full carbon and alloy options
- Four frame sizes to choose from

Without a shadow of doubt, the Zesty was the bike that made Lapierre a household name in the UK. In recent years, however, it seemed to lose some of its *je ne sais quoi*. So it's great to see Lapierre refocus the Zesty range for 2016.

The line is still split between XM and AM options, where the XM bike has 120mm travel, and the AM sports 30mm more and is aimed squarely at the aspiring enduro racer.

Both platforms get completely redesigned frames, and there are no longer any shared frame parts, so the geometry for each model is now optimised for its travel and intended use.

The bike we're looking at here is the Zesty XM. It gets a 130mm-travel fork, and with its go-getter attitude — afforded by the relatively slack 67° head angle — it was easy to take the spindly RockShox Revelation to its limit and beyond. Although, I should point out, most other 120mm bikes would have struggled to keep up with the Zesty on the high Alpine trails of the Portes du Soleil.

Even though the frame still uses Lapierre's OST+ suspension design, there are some key differences. The obvious one is that the shock extender yoke has been canned and the shock is now anchored to the underside of the top tube instead of the down tube, making space for a water bottle mount. It's not simply a repackaging exercise though; the leverage curve has



also been tweaked to be more progressive and better handle big hits while the pivot locations have also been optimised for 1x and 2x drivetrains.

All very geeky stuff, but having size 11 feet, the biggest improvement for me is that the back end on the Zesty is now narrower, and I no longer rub my heels on the stays. The Ei design has also been improved. LED lights on the stem mount let you know, at a glance, which mode the shock is in, and even though I tried to outsmart it, the electronic brain always seemed to be one step ahead of me.

Christian Fairclough

mbr

## HIGHS

Lapierre has finally got the cockpit on the Zesty sorted and combined with the longer frames and revised geometry, the fit is better than ever. Ei is smaller and more user-friendly too.

## LOWS

Given the aggro attitude, the new Zesty XM would benefit from a stiffer fork, even if that bumps up the weight. We're also mourning the loss of the Zesty 29er!





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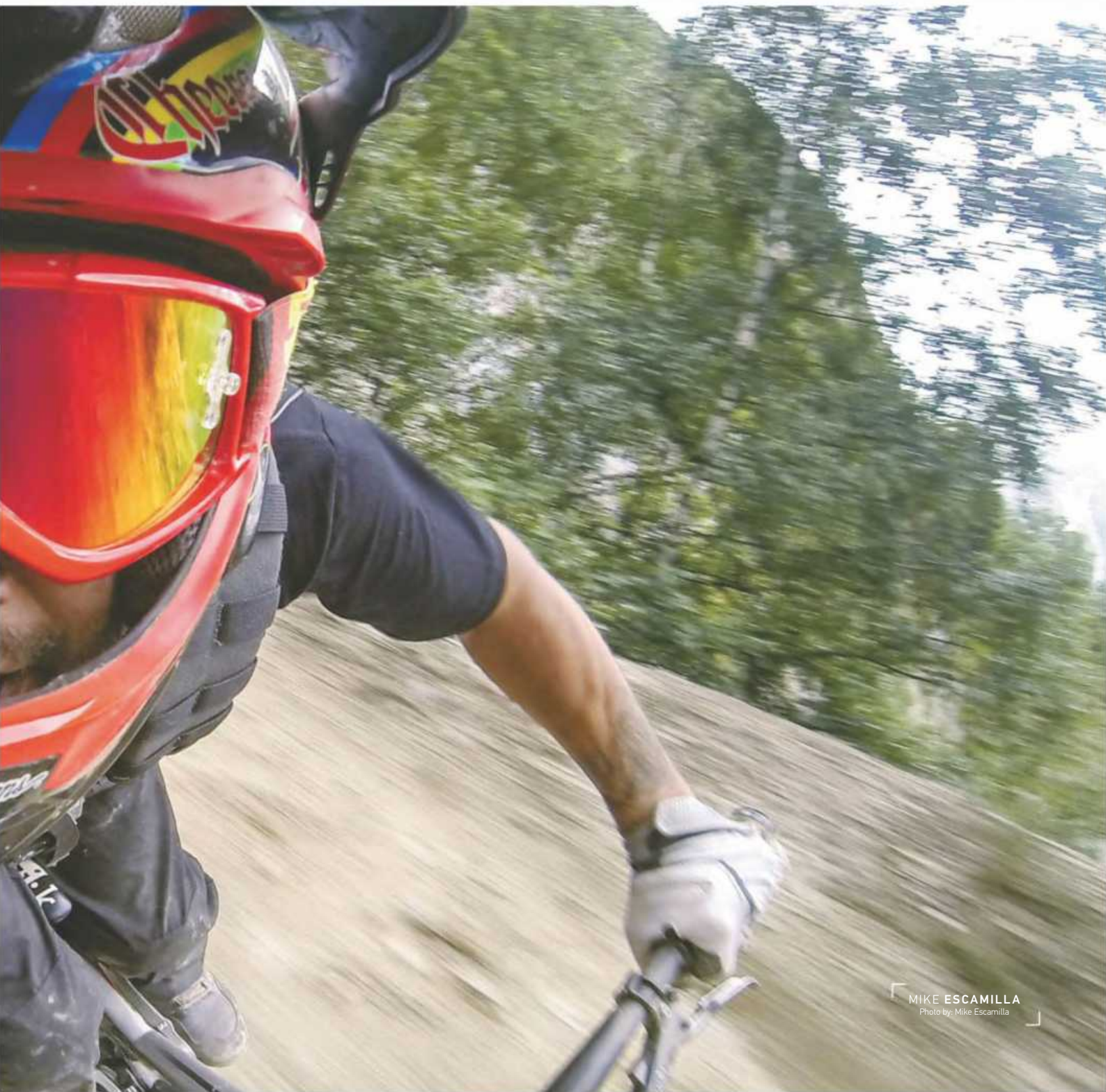
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# REAL WORLD RIDING

**Dan Trent  
just wants  
to ride — but  
life keeps  
getting in  
the way**



## Appy days

*You don't need technology to meet local riders*

**T**echnology has brought many wonderful things into the palm of our hands, not least the ability to find people or things in our vicinity in which we might be attracted to. The young and carefree can enjoy the spontaneous browsing of local interest, casually swiping left or right to find exactly what they want. Then when you reach a certain age, Rightmove takes over and serves a similar purpose, even if the resulting anecdotes aren't quite as lurid.

Moving swiftly on. At least the latter has got me back to my Yorkshire homeland. OK, at the time of writing the living room is still a chaotic mix of random furniture, and Junior T is sleeping in a cardboard box because I haven't yet built his cotbed. But I have prioritised the unpacking and got my bike cellar sorted. I'd be lying if I said this hadn't been a major factor in my choice of this house, much as the sheds were last time. A man has priorities.

So I've got the bikes prepped. I've got steep hills, plenty of tracks on the doorstep and some (slightly) out-of-date local trail knowledge. I just don't have anyone to ride with. And in the absence of a Tinder-style 'match-up' app for mountain bikers, I've been out on my own.

Wednesday nights were the big social ride night with my old gang in Hertfordshire, so setting out on my own at the same time felt a little weird, knowing that a couple of hundred miles away my mates were enjoying a sociable ride in the summer sunshine. But after a brutal reminder of how long and steep West Yorkshire hills can be, I crossed paths with a large local gang out for their own mid-week ride. There was certainly a good number of them, they seemed friendly enough and at least three-quarters of them were riding Oranges too, so I probably could have slipped into their ranks unnoticed.

But I thought it only polite to introduce myself, explain my situation and ask if I could join them. "If you like," said the ride leader, looking me up and down and raising a sceptical eyebrow



Without a Tinder app for  
M.T.B.'ers, I'm on my own

before asking: "Is this what you normally do then — just ride around hoping you bump into folk?" Erm, pretty much.

Now, those not used to Yorkshire ways might take that as quite abrupt. In reality that counts as effusive, and once the initial awkwardness of me gatecrashing their ride subsided, I was soon chatting and getting the local riding intel, while trying hard not to come across as too desperate.

A tricky etiquette has to be observed when riding with a new group too, especially one you've just tagged onto. Do you ride at the front, banging handlebars with the leaders to impress upon them your credibility? Or do you mooch along at the back with the

more sociable types in the hope they'll be more open to conversation than chasing KoMs? In the end I did a bit of both, correctly identifying that the man with the route plan would likely also be the one in charge of information about when and where they ride. But I curbed my more natural competitive instincts and deferred to the pecking order on the downhills, rather than buzzing tyres and pulling sketchy 4X-style overtakes as typically happens when I get a bit overexcited. Not first date behaviour, that. Maybe next time.

One ride in and I've got some local contacts though. This is a good start. And it turns out you don't even need an app for that.





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## BORN AGAIN RIDER

**After years off the bike, veteran mtb snapper Geoff Waugh has caught the bug again**



# When the going gets smooth

*The pro riders that make the transition from trail to tarmac*

**B**y the time these words are transformed from ones and zeros into ink on THE page, the three-week carnival around France for very thin men with equally skinny tyres will be over.

If you watch these races then you may have heard the commentators declaring that so-and-so were former mountain bikers. I am not certain if this adds some colour to a dull part of the racing, or because it may be of interest to the world, but it got me thinking — what difference does it make anyway?

Money, of course, is one of them. Everyone needs coin, and when mtb racing's golden years of fat contracts and big name sponsors lost its sheen, the writing was on the wall. Those with youth and talent on their side pursued their goals in a new cycling arena. It was a reverse of the mini exodus from road racing into mountain biking in the mid 1990s, when riders in the twilight of their careers fancied a bit of extreme action and MTV-style exposure that it brought. A couple did OK. Jérôme Chiotti won the World MTB Champs in Australia, only to fall foul of the road racers' curse (allegedly!) of doping and he was stripped of his title. Tour polka-dot jersey winner Robert Millar raced off-road for the Giant team, but later told me he hated it when his wheels started to slide off line, and particularly when both drifted simultaneously!

There, I reckon is the crux: handling. In a world where fitness, power output and power-to-weight ratios are viewed as the Holy Grail, how to gain advantage through better bike handling seems to have taken a backseat... or at least one in the middle row.

My dad-in-law, bless him, was a fan of the time trial; a black shorts with no branding, get-up-at-sparrow's-fart-to-ride-down-a-dual-carriageway tester. To him mountain biking was simply riding off the roads. It was what kids did before 'graduating' to a road bike. When Dave Watson hucked his Kona over the peloton he thought it dishonoured the men toiling in the heat below.

A friend once raced a fish and chipper around his local woods, and after the finish, was accosted by a furious road racer who wanted to know why he had overtaken him on the descent. "Because we are racing", was his nonchalant reply. In the bar-banging world of Sport Cat XC racing unnerving a rival on descent is a bona fide tactic no? That 'move'



MTB'ers make great roadies  
'cos they love throwing  
them selves **DOWNHILL**

that Warren Barguil accidentally put on Geraint Thomas in this year's Tour de France is called a block pass in off-road parlance, and is perfectly acceptable.

One of the first big name mountain bikers to jump ship was Cadel Evans — an overall World Cup series winner on several occasions. No one took Evans's dirt credentials seriously, until a soaking wet Tour of Italy stage, on the unmettled white roads of Tuscany, saw him smoke the field on the loose and unpredictable descents. Suddenly, fitness took a back seat to a sensitive grip on the bars, looking down the trail and relaxing, while others did the exact opposite.

Evans was soon followed by Ryder Hesjedal — an XC racer with the Gary Fisher team — who actually went one better and won the whole bloomin' race.

Personally, I think mtb'ers make great roadies, because they get a perverse and very real pleasure from throwing themselves downhill as fast as their legs will take them. The lines are pretty blurry now, but there is still some truth in the adage that road riding is all about climbing, and mountain biking prioritises descending. Jumping potholes and hopping up and down kerbs are requisite skills in a large bunch of riders, and are all second nature to a boy weaned in the woods. Leaning on riders, sprinting for small gaps are all skills we grow up learning and are easily transferable to the tarmac. But I'd hate to think of a school of thought where a young racer uses XC as a stepping-stone into a professional road career. Cross-country racing is niche enough as it is.



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## YOUR LETTERS

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## ★ STAR LETTER ★

## BABY BOOM

Way back at the end of 2008, I'd saved enough money to buy my favourite bike at the time, a Trek Fuel EX8 in Khaki Green. I loved it. I rode it all the time on loads of different trails and religiously cleaned it, often leaving it to dry in our hallway, much to the dismay of my wife!

Fast-forward to 2013, and the birth of our first son. Somehow, between family life and work life, my beloved Trek became neglected. I simply couldn't find the time to disappear off for a few hours' riding on a regular basis.

Fast-forward again to June 2015 when I made the heart-breaking decision to sell it, as I just hadn't used it over the previous two years. It sold almost straight away, with the buyer collecting the very next day. So with my cash I bought a Cube hardtail and child seat for my now two-year-old son.

I got home, and although excited with my shiny new toy, I still yearned for my Trek and some singletrack. Anyway, I fitted the seat to the back and went



Hitting the trails with your kids is twice the fun



out straight away for a ride with my son, and to my surprise, he instantly loved it and so did I!

It was then I realised that, although I did miss my full-bouncer and a twisting fast bit of singletrack, this was way better! In that moment, none of it mattered anymore, I had real one-on-one quality time with my little best mate and I was still on a mountain bike, outdoors and

getting some proper exercise!

Best of all, every Saturday morning he yells with excitement "Daddy bike!" So, with the enthusiasm he is already showing, I know it won't be long before I'm back on the trails trying to keep up with my kids!

Ben Coombe

Ed — It's stories like this that bode well for the future of our sport.

## LIFE BEGINS AT 40

At the age of 40, after losing my dad, I asked a mate to take me mountain biking at Llandegla. The only biking I had done was tootling along the canal on my hybrid. So I bought a Giant Revel hardtail to see if I liked it.

My mate said that we were going to do the red trail, that I would be OK and to just get off and walk if I found it too tricky. After the killer hill I wondered what had I let myself in for! And then the descent began.

After a shaky start, my mate said: "You look as though you are enjoying it."

I asked him how he knew and he said: "The grin on your face from ear to ear!"

A few more shaky moments, and very tired legs, and I was hooked. The cake at the cafe and pint on the way home also finished one of the best days I had experienced in a long time. After a few more local rides at Nant yr Arian and Gisburn I decided to buy a full-suspension bike.

After much research reading reviews I

decided on a Rockrider 9.1 from Decathlon as I was on a tight budget. I can say I was not disappointed — what a good spec for the money. I can't wait to hit the local trail centres again with my mates.

Mark Hudson

## UNLUCKY STRIKE

My girlfriend's shiny new Stumpjumper 650b Comp arrived a few days before the latest mbr issue. She had been on a test ride (that didn't include any technical climbs) and loved it, but after taking it on a few rides at our local trail centre she really noticed the dreaded pedal strike you mentioned in your review.

My question is: How (if at all) can we solve this problem?

Tom Lewis

Ed — The first thing we'd try would be a set of shorter cranks. Try swapping the 175mm cranks for 170mm versions, or even 165mm if you can find any — not cheap, but





YT Capra AL1:  
available in XL

it should gain enough clearance to reduce those pesky pedal strikes.

## LETTER HEAD

I've got £3,500 to spend on a 650b enduro bike. I've read so many reviews, done a lot of research but I'm still no closer to finding a bike.

The YT Capra is my first choice but at 6ft 2in, the size L — according to reviews — is too small for me. I'm really interested in the Canyon, but your review says it's also a bit small for me. On paper, the top tube length and reach in frame size L seems bigger than, or measures very close to, some other bikes in size XL, so I would have thought I would be OK with a size L.

Would it be worth buying it to see how it fits? If not, are there any other bikes you would recommend?

*Ify Offiah*

**Ed —** If the Capra is your first choice, you'll be pleased to know there's now an XL size available for the aluminium AL1 model. Alternatively, take a look at the rangy Mondraker Dune. You may even be able to pick up a discounted 2015 model at a bargain price.

## TRAIL BAIT

I loved the raw power bars you mentioned in the July issue (p28), so tasty and quick to make. Here's another snack idea that I make to give me a quick energy boost on a long ride...

Melt 200g of dark chocolate, add a mug of mixed seeds (I use an omega mix), chuck in a handful of raisins and bashed up almonds. Stir until fully coated with chocolate. Line a baking tray with a piece of greaseproof paper and spread the mix over the paper. For an extra boost I sometimes add a sprinkle of chia seeds. Pop in the fridge until set. Then just break into bits, pop into a freezer bag and bung in the bag.



Chocolate nut bars:  
soon to be arriving  
at mbr towers...

Makes enough for the two of us for a couple of good epic weekends.

*Sarah Spencer*

**Ed —** I think we need to be the judge of your energy bars. Just send a batch to mbr towers and we'll let you know.

## COUNTING THE COST

I read the August star letter and felt I had to write in. The author mentions that he took his bike for a service but was put off by the extortionate service fee.

Do people realise that bike shops are a business and have overheads? Such as rent or mortgage, wages, heat and light, advertising, etc. If you spend a few grand on a bike it comes with the same responsibilities as buying and maintaining a car. If you're going to spend money on a bike make sure you can afford to maintain it.

*Paul Hodgson*

**Ed —** While we agree that bike shops get a tough rap, and running one is no walk in the park, in this instance we'd have to say give the poor kid a break! He's only 16! Bearing in mind the 'digital revolution', he probably can't even get a job as a paperboy anymore!

## QUICK LINES

### HARSH LESSON

A friend of mine told me that you may be interested in the newest lesson I have learned, "trail maps don't lie — hard is hard"

I recently bought my first hardtail (Cube LTD 650b) and then upgraded the pedals.

So, along with a couple of friends from work, I decided to go test them out up on the Long Mynd in Shropshire. Coming down Minton Batch (a very technical rocky descent) seemed like a great idea at the top, but landed me flat on my face with a bruised ego and six stitches courtesy of Shrewsbury A&E.

Hoping to head back for a solid run soonish...

*Ben Law*

# OLD BLOKES

## WHO SHOULD KNOW BETTER

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brokenriders.com



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**WINNER**  
receives a Broken  
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**WHO** Will Jenkins **WHERE** Surrey **WHEN** February 2015 **HOW** Foot came out of pedal, not enough speed to clear gap jump. Decided to brake with face. Just bought a full-face helmet!



**WHO** James McNally **WHERE** Grimethorpe, South Yorkshire **WHEN** July 2015 **HOW** Hit a small tree stump at 20mph. Out cold for 15 minutes.



**WHO** Matt Sander **WHERE** Bavaria, Germany **WHEN** July 2015 **HOW** Some military humour, following a "slight crash" that led to a broken pelvis, several fractured vertebrae and a broken leg/knee cap



**WHO** Mark 'Lemming' Whitehead **WHERE** BikePark Wales **WHEN** July 2015 **HOW** Front pinch-flat, tyre ripped off, rim dug in, bike spat me off, slammed hip into ground





**2013 GIANT ANTHEM X2**  
Alloy frame, Rockshox Minion rear shock, Rockshox Raha RL fork, 30 speed Shimano Deore SLX gearing, Shimano disc brakes rrp £1700 now £1379.99



**2014 GIANT ANTHEM 27.5 3**  
Alloy suspension frame, Rockshox Raha RL fork, 20 speed Shimano Deore SLX gearing, Shimano disc brakes rrp £1500 now £1099.99



**2014 SCOTT SCALE 735**  
Carbon frame, Rockshox XC30 Gold fork, 20 Speed Shimano Deore SLX gearing and brakes, Syncros finishing kit RRP £1800 now £1199.99



**2013 CANNONDALE TRAIL SL1**  
Rockshox rears air fork, 30 speed Shimano Deore SLX gearing, Shimano hydraulic disc brakes RRP £1100 NOW £679.99



**2013 GIANT GLORY FRAME**  
8" travel Maestro alloy suspension frame, Rockshox World R2C Air rear shock, 12mm axle, rrp £2000 now £549.99



**2013 CANNONDALE TRIGGER 29ER 3**  
Alloy frame, X Fusion rear shock, Rockshox Revolution fork, 20 Speed Shimano SLX/XT hydraulic disc brakes rrp £2600 now £1249.99



**2014 CUBE LTD RACE 29**  
Alloy hardtail, Rockshox Raha RL, Pogo fork, 30 speed Shimano SLX/XT gearing, XT hubs and Deore hydraulic disc brakes rrp £1100 now £679.99



**2014 MONGOOSE SALVO COMP 29**  
Full Suspension frame, X Fusion rear shock, Sunner fork, 21 speed Shimano Alivio gearing with Hayes hydraulic disc brakes rrp £1100 now £559.99



**2014 CANNONDALE TANGO 29 5**  
Women's 29er hardtail, Sunner lock set forks, 27 speed Shimano Alivio/Acera gearing, Cannondale hydraulic disc brakes rrp £500 now £359.99



**2014 CANNONDALE F29 5**  
Alloy frame 29er, Lefty PBR 90 fork, 20 Speed Shimano Deore SLX gearing, Shimano hydraulic disc brakes, Sunner wheels rrp £2000 now £1599.99



**2013 GIANT TRANCE X29ER 2**  
Alloy suspension 29er frame, Rockshox rears fork, Monarch mini shock, 20 speed XT hydraulic disc brakes, 30mm thru axle fork rrp £1500 NOW ONLY £1049.99



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**2014 CANNONDALE TRAIL SL29 3**  
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**2014 GIANT XTC ADVANCED 27.5 2**  
Carbon frame, Fox 321mm fork, 20 Speed Shimano XT/XTL gearing, XT disc brakes, Giant wheels by DT Swiss rrp £2500 now £1799.99



**2013 CANNONDALE JEKYLL 3**  
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SCALE 620 RRP £2300  
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SCALE 740 RRP £1800  
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SCALE 720 RRP £2300  
SCALE 935 RRP £1600  
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**mongoose 2012**  
TVAX COMP RRP £500  
SALVO COMP RRP £1000  
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NOW £549.99

**GIANT BICYCLES 2013**  
TALON 1 RRP £1000  
TRANCE X 29ER 2 RRP £1500  
ANTHEM X 29ER 4 RRP £1500  
ANTHEM X 29ER 3 RRP £1700  
ANTHEM X 2 RRP £1700  
ANTHEM X 29ER 2 RRP £1800  
ANTHEM X1 RRP £2400  
XTC COMPOSITE 29ER 2 RRP £1700  
XTC ADVANCED SL 1 RRP £3500  
GLORY FRAME RRP £2000  
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NOW £999.99  
NOW £1199.99  
NOW £999.99  
NOW £1599.99  
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NOW £2249.99  
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**2014**  
XTC ADVANCED 27.5 4 RRP £1600  
XTC ADVANCED 27.5 3 RRP £1900  
XTC ADVANCED 27.5 2 RRP £2500  
ANTHEM 27.5 3 RRP £1500  
ANTHEM 27.5 2 RRP £1850  
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NOW £1449.99  
NOW £1799.99  
NOW £1099.99  
NOW £1299.99

**iCUBE 2013**  
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**2014**  
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AMS HPA 29 RRP £1500  
LTD RACE RRP £1100  
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REACTION GTC PRO 29 RRP £1400  
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NOW £1199.99  
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NOW £1099.99  
NOW £1099.99

**cannondale 2012**  
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FLASH CARBON 1 RRP £4300  
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**2013**  
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F29 1 RRP £2000  
F29 2 RRP £1800  
SCALPEL 29ER 1 CARBON RRP £6000  
JEKYLL 3 RRP £3200  
TRIGGER 29ER 1 RRP £3600  
TRIGGER 29ER 2 RRP £3000  
TRIGGER 29ER 3 RRP £2800  
F26 CARBON 3 RRP £2500  
BZ120 XLR2 RRP £2500  
SCALPEL 29ER 4 RRP £2000  
SCALPEL 29ER CARBON 2 RRP £4500  
JEKYLL CARBON 2 RRP £4800  
TRIGGER CARBON 1 RRP £5500  
TRIGGER CARBON 2 RRP £3800  
NOW £679.99  
NOW £1229.99  
NOW £1099.99  
NOW £3599.99  
NOW £1599.99  
NOW £1799.99  
NOW £1499.99  
NOW £1469.99  
NOW £1399.99  
NOW £1199.99  
NOW £2999.99  
NOW £2999.99  
NOW £1749.99  
NOW £1749.99

**2014**  
F29 BLACK INC RRP £7800  
F29 CARBON 2 RRP £3900  
F29 CARBON 3 RRP £2900  
F29 ALLOY 4 RRP £2400  
F29 ALLOY 5 RRP £2000  
TRIGGER 29 4 RRP £2300  
TRAIL SL 29 1 RRP £1250  
TRAIL SL 29 2 RRP £1100  
TRAIL SL 29 3 RRP £900  
TANGO 29 5 RRP £600  
TANGO 29 6 RRP £500  
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## THE BIG QUESTION

Every day, **mbr**'s forum is awash with advice, stories and gossip. Here's what you've been talking about this month.

**Have you ever tried introducing a friend to mountain biking? If so, what happened? Have they gone on to be better than you?**

Yes, a semi-pro roadie I used to live with. I badgered her for ages to try it and even attended cyclo-cross events that she said were "basically the same". Then she rented some mountain bikes with her dad, another keen roadie, and about a month later owned a new hardtail.

*Randomist*

I recently persuaded my brother to come out for a quick ride. Two weeks later he has bought the same bike as me and is quicker down the Rivington Pike descent on Strava.

*Epgilbertson*

Yes — loads. Most of them are still speaking to me. Some are still riding. One remains convinced I was trying to kill him.

*KMJ*

I introduced my brother-in-law (before that title became official!). I lent him my bike at the time and now he's my best mate, continual wingman for rides and the first person I ask advice for when looking at new kit. He's probably more obsessed than I am and I don't think his wife has ever forgiven me.

*Bedds*

My daughter, who is 11 in August. Started taking her around Dalby two years ago when she had a 20-inch single-speed. Thankfully she's happy wearing protection and chucking herself down downhill bits and rocks. She is already asking about full-suspension!

*Gunwitch*

I got my 22-year-old son into it around the same time that I started (I'm 40 years older than him). Then I got faster than him and he lost interest. Go figure.

*Poey50*

## NEXT MONTH

### WHAT'S THE MOST SCARED YOU'VE EVER BEEN ON YOUR BIKE?

Join the debate at [po.st/Scared](http://po.st/Scared)

# YOUR PHOTOS







**WINS**

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**01** Sunlight shot in the Dark Peak  
Photo: Tim Royle

**02** At the French National  
Downhill Championships  
Photo: Chris Potter

**03** Summer in Nant yr Arian  
Photo: Nigel Snape

**04** Boardman Team FS on Dartmoor  
Photo: Anthony Girling

**05** A break on the Glen Einich climb  
Photo: Rob Brooks



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Please include a caption so we know  
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**01**

**03**



**BIKE LOVE**

**04**



**05**

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TRAIL  
CENTRE  
FOCUS

# ON ANY GIVEN SUNDAY

*From downhill groms to weekend warriors, the Forest of Dean welcomes mountain bikers of every tribe, and we tagged along for the ride*

Words: Jamie Darlow  
Photos: Roo Fowler, Andy Lloyd





In association with





**T**om Everett and Jack Delbridge are searching for secret singletrack up on the hill above the Forest of Dean trail centre hub. They know it's here, tantalisingly close and probably just yards away, but we find them on the main trail and the first accessible track from the uplift. Sixteen-year-old Jack has just skipped over the top of a berm, missed two trees by a whisker and ended up tangled in brambles.

"I just messed up the lip there — it's really bumpy," he says, emerging with scratches and a big grin. "We're trying to find some different trails."

We know they're here because we rode the enduro this year and they use a lot of off-piste stuff."

Jack's friend Tom, 18, has skipped work and driven the pair up from Somerset today for a spot of enduro training on some of Monmouth's legendary secret trails. "We just need to find some locals who can show us around."

Not far away, less than a mile as the crow flies down the fearsomely named Sheep Skull, is local rider Ieuan Williams, 26 years old and from Usk in Wales. Tattered Five Tens propped in front of him, happily basking in the warmth of the sun outside the trail centre cafe, he's a self-proclaimed mountain bike addict.

"Some of the stuff I could take you on around here is insane. It's just wild," he says, taking another sip of his coffee. "There's a lot of local stuff that's been built on the side. The problem they've got here is that so many trails aren't sign-posted — people get on the uplift and nobody knows where they're going and what else is here. If they just looked a little bit further down the road than the drop-off, they'd find loads of trails."

## WIDENING APPEAL

Who rides a modern trail centre? Less than five years ago, each UK trail centre seemed content to appeal to just one kind of rider. Go to Afan

TRAIL  
CENTRE  
FOCUS

## ABOUT THE SERIES

Trail centres were invented right here in the UK. No other country has such an extensive network of artfully crafted trails, from Glentress in the borders of Scotland down to Queen Elizabeth Country Park in the heart of the South Downs. And with no two trail centres alike, we're making it our mission to bring you the best of man-made singletrack in the country. From the newest trails that flow like water to the old, rocky legacies of the '90s, every trail and trail centre has a story to tell. There's a broad depth of quality to be enjoyed by everyone, whether you're after a quick half-hour fix or an all-day ride.



or Glentress and you'd find trail riders. Head to Innerleithen or Aston Hill and downhillers in full-face helmets would be the dominant life form. But now it's not so easy — the best trail centres are switched on to appealing to all mountain bikers.

Nowhere does this show itself more than the Forest of Dean. This ancient woodland and Area of Natural Beauty has been home to the West Country downhill set for most of its mountain biking life, boasting an efficient uplift service and a spread of downhill tracks all finishing at the cafe and pickup point below. Beginners, XC riders and kids be damned.

Then in 2011, everything changed. The 11km Verderer's Trail is a mere wisp compared to its brethren across the Welsh border in Afan and Cwmcam. But that didn't stop trail riders ghosting into the forest seemingly overnight. It's hard to explain just how much the trail has changed the dynamic of the Forest, but here's one example: in August 2011, a year before the blue trail opened, 906 laps were completed on all the trails combined. But by August 2012 the trail counters showed 8,174 laps on the Verderer's alone. It's currently clocking up some 100,000 riders a year.

The Forest of Dean is now the most complete trail centre in Britain, after the launch of the UK's

only track designed specifically for four-wheeled disability bikes. Add that to the uplift service, the downhill tracks, the bike hire business and the family trail, and nowhere else in Britain will you find such a varied and interesting group of riders. It's like taking a core sample of riders in Britain, just without the blood.

There is plenty of gore on show today though — Ieuan Williams' leg is running with blood from what looks like a pedal strike. Not surprising given he makes his own flat pedals and uses 7.5mm grub screws as pins (something that probably explains the state of those Five Tens too).

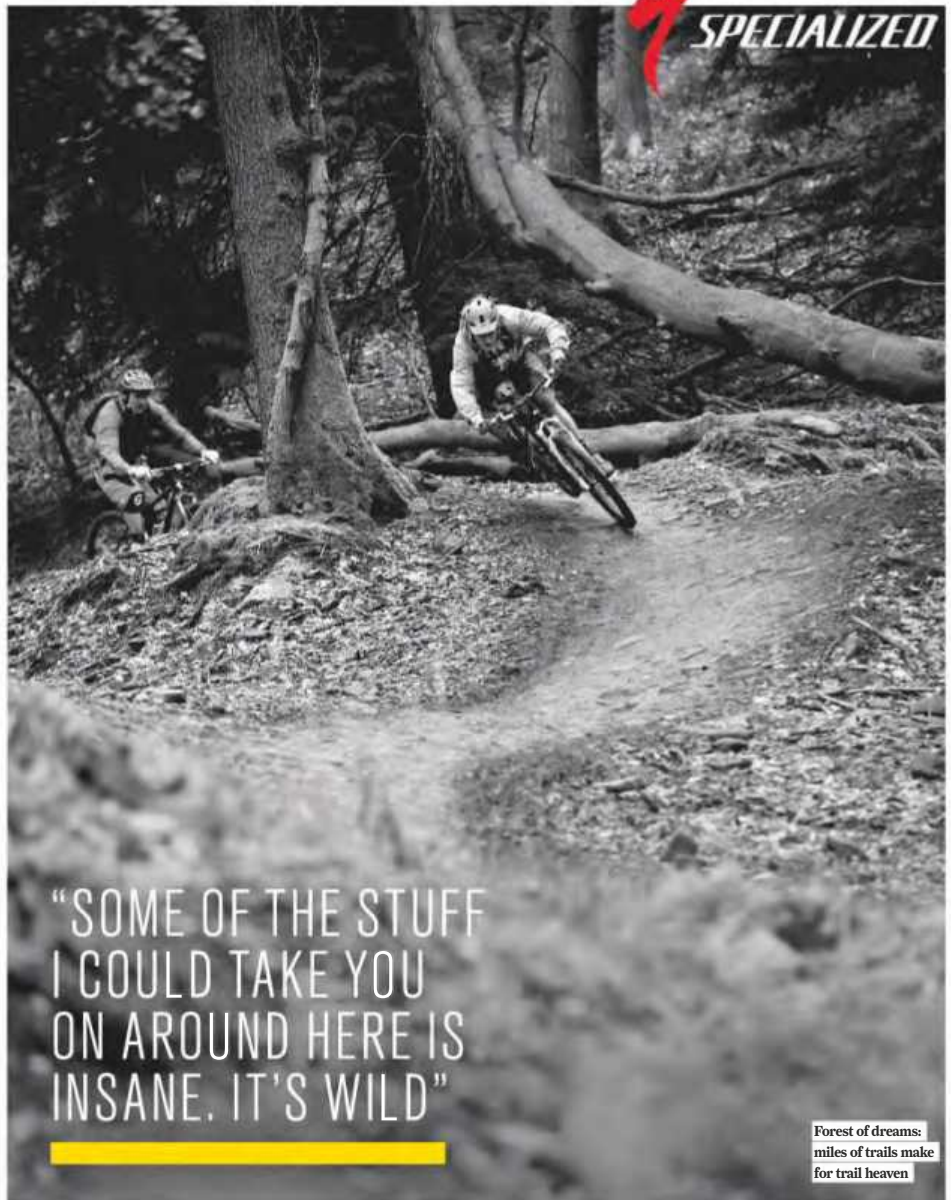
Ieuan is at the top of the mountain bike pyramid; he lives it, loves it, and dedicates his life to it. "My job is a mechanic," he explains. "But I've got my own car garage that pays for my life of doing bugger all and riding bikes. I do as little as possible to fund my lovely hobby."

You can't help but like the guy. He oozes confidence, walks and talks like he owns this place, but still manages to be friendly and helpful to everyone here. He's as happy to help out the lost pair looking for the uplift as he is to hit the 70ft stepdown he's building. Yes, 70ft. He's built it with a mechanical digger and plans to ride it as a season finale, after the downhill calendar closes. 🏆





Tom (right) and Jack are searching for hidden trail gems



"SOME OF THE STUFF I COULD TAKE YOU ON AROUND HERE IS INSANE. IT'S WILD"

Forest of dreams: miles of trails make for trail heaven



Downhill hotheads flip their lids



Team mbr get stuck in at the cafe



Big rigs begin their journey back up to the trailhead



## FEATURE

"I've got lots of people coming to watch. I wouldn't want to hit it on my own," he says. "I like big stuff. I did a whip the other day, got the bike easily over 90 degrees. 'That's what I do, whip the bike well — I want to go to Whip-off Worlds. I'd do alright over there because it just comes easy to me.'"

This kind of riding comes at a cost, though. Ieuan has notched up 160 X-rays in his short life, plus nine operations, two broken legs, three fractured ribs, four collarbone breaks, one snapped wrist, one punctured lung and one bleeding kidney. He's spent six weeks in hospital, 14 in a wheelchair, "but I'll still do it, you've got to! It's like an addiction. I'll do it till the day I can't."

Ieuan's attitude to risk is on another level to most of us, but he's got a great understanding of what makes the Forest of Dean great. "You can come here and smile all day — you can ride something in the woods that's steep and with hairpin bends all the way down, then you can ride a man-made and manicured trail. There's enough here to keep everyone happy."

It could be the sunshine on this busy Sunday or it could be the influx of newbie riders wobbling and skidding out of the bike hire shop, but there's a real carnival atmosphere in evidence. Jeans, T-shirts, rugby shorts and trainers form many riders' wardrobe of choice — something they'll probably regret half way round the 18km green loop — but they seem happy enough. Toddlers in trailers or strapped into top tube seats, moody teenagers pulling big skids, and 40-somethings popping wheelies, all mix easily around the mobile hog-roast and ice cream van. The sound of three different music systems, the buzz of excited chatter and the occasional food order shout from the grumpy hog-roast man only add to the festival feel.

## TWO'S COMPANY

Just finishing their bacon butties are Julia Innes, 29, and Andy Lovell, 42, from Bristol, gathering strength for their traditional second lap of Verderer's. The couple ride all over Wales →



Living the dream:  
Ieuan's a mountain  
biker to the core...



...and he's got the  
ripped Five Tens  
to prove it



Andy's a new  
Verderer's addict...



...as is partner in  
grime Julia



Hardpack trails  
snake through  
the trees



Motivational  
mantra of  
the day



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Elliot's got skills  
his dad can only  
dream of...

but the Forest of Dean is their current favourite. Ashton Court in Bristol used to be top of their list, but Andy says the trails there have become too sanitised. "They're not long enough and they're too family orientated. Yes, there are other trails there like Fifty Acre Wood and the stuff in the Gorge, but I'm just not that gnarly!"

Julia despises Cwmcarn for its interminable climb, so the forest here is her firm favourite. "The views up through the woods are amazing and apparently there are wild boar here — we've seen hoof prints, which is exciting, but no boar yet," she says. "The climb on the Verderer's is tolerable and the downhill is really fun. It's a big grin all the way down."

The trail has changed a fair amount in its short life, and Julia has noticed that it has become rougher and tougher, with "more red sections to test yourself on". In fact, the original blue-graded Verderer's had to be reclassified red last year, with the sheer quantity of riders taking its toll on the once-smooth surface. Rowan Sorrell from Back on Track, which built the trail for £200,000, has come back in to build an alternative last 1.5km of blue run while keeping the original trail intact. It's not finished yet though, as work had to stop to let endangered owls complete their nesting and fledge... something they did just this week.

Andy and Julia didn't exactly meet on Verderer's, but mountain biking did bring them together, through Bristol club Cheesy Riders. "I had a bit of a zombie bike and then this man went, 'what you want is a nice mountain bike', and from there on it blossomed," Julia says. We're not sure if she means mountain biking or their relationship... probably both.

"He's also my bicycle repair man. We've got so many bikes in the house now, as long as we're on two wheels we're happiest."

The couple leave big jumps and high speeds to people like 14-year-old Elliot Thomes. Dressed head to toe in Troy Lee, a Leatt neck brace that literally has his name on it, and IXS knee-shin pads, he is every bit the downhill grom.

"I did my first downhill race a couple of weeks ago," Elliot says. "I got 15th in the first run down, but I made a few mistakes and fell off in the second run. I ended up 19th."



The trail centre  
fleet's got a range  
of bikes for all

Elliot, his dad Adrian, 51, and 13-year-old brother Oliver are pushing up to save the cost of taking the uplift. "That's why he had to give up racing go-karts," Adrian says. "Elliot was competing against kids whose parents spent £2,000 a day on tyres and breakages. When mum and dad turn up in a Ferrari you know it's just a ridiculous sport!"

Elliot's a bit shy but his dad definitely isn't reluctant to sing his son's praises, or to laugh at himself. "You should have come here the other week," Adrian says. "I broke my nose, smashed my helmet to bits! And I got whiplash on my neck. Elliot just goes off with faster riders now and leaves me and his brother behind."

Once safely out of earshot, Elliot tells us he was faster than his dad the first day he swung his leg over a mountain bike. "I could kick his ass right away," he says with a grin. "He's got all the gear and no idea."

## READY FOR ANYTHING

Elliot rides the waymarked downhill runs, of which there are 10 in total, all lasting around three minutes... unless you're Fabien Barel (see him at po.st/Fabien) in which case you'll do them in two. The soil in the forest is sandy and rocky so it drains well and is usable even in the worst winter conditions, while the gradient is enough to excite newbie riders and please old hands at the same time. It's within an hour or two's drive of London, Birmingham, Bristol and South Wales. It's that combination of ease of use and great trails that

## THE CLIMB ON THE VERDERER'S IS TOLERABLE AND THE DOWNHILL IS REALLY FUN



Smooth-flowing  
singletrack offers  
full-throttle kicks

draws people past their closest riding spots and on to Monmouth.

The Forest of Dean is in danger from its own success, however, according to Alan Grist from Dean Trail Volunteers, who are responsible for maintaining and building all the trails bar Verderer's, Launchpad and the green trail.

"We've been grovelling for years for investment," Alan says. "We've got more people coming here than ever, from enduro and downhill race days, to family riders, to downhillers sessioning tracks. They all take a toll on the trails. We need a full-time trail builder (preferably me!) and then a new car park and a pump track. In that order."

It's the red tape and the lack of ring-fenced investment that's the problem, Alan says. "We're





Trick and treat: stunt riding is hungry work for young Megan

currently sat on £20,000 to build new trails, but that's not very much when you consider the 1km of Launchpad cost £50,000. We want that money to go as far as possible so we can't be going to a big company, instead we'll get a regular contractor and the Volunteers will design it.

"Everyman trails like Freeminers get thousands of riders, GBU is used for practising gap jumps and Mr Rooty to session tight turns," Alan says. "Then there are the races and the downhillers. Pedalabikeaway runs the Little Fodders kids' coaching club... you can see how much the trails get used."

Seven-year-old Megan Cherry would be a perfect Little Fodder, but instead she's a Junior Rocket at Leicester Forest Cycling Club. Together with her dad Dave she's here to play, not learn, and Dave is happy to drive the 100 miles to let Megan have fun.

Back home there's the mighty Peak District and plenty of local bridleways, but they're hard work for Megan, Dave says. "The forest trails here are nice and safe and fairly easy riding. The green trail follows the old railway lines — we tend to come and go from it, it's easy to duck off and find a local pub and get back on it."

It's not all flat and easy on the green though — the pair of them have found berms and little jumps just off to the side. Megan loves it. "I like stunts! Really big wheelies and jumps. Daddy can do wheelies sometimes..." She breaks off to stare transfixed as Ieuan Williams pulls a wheelie all the way back to his car. "I can do it but I can't do it really high," she says sincerely.

So what kind of people ride at a modern trail centre? It's a broad spread: youngsters on balance bikes and slightly older gentlemen on electric bikes, gravity junkies on £6,000 downhill bikes and XC whippets on hardtails. Big groups of blokes jostling for position are there, of course, but so are families, couples and newbie riders.

Mountain biking is for everyone in the UK, and Ieuan Williams sums it up nicely here at the Forest of Dean: "There's stuff here for anyone to play around on for a few hours, but I'm going to bugger off now and ride something a bit different, because there's some amazing stuff around here. You crack on!" **mbr**



## FOREST OF DEAN

### THE TRAILS

■ **GREEN** 18km, 1-2 hours

■ **BLUE** 11km (plus 5km alternative end), 45 minutes-1 hour

■ **RED** 4.5km, 20 minutes

■ **BLACK** 10km (multiple downhill trails), 1 hour

#### PICK OF THE TRAILS

The Verderer's is graded blue for easy, but it's not to be sniffed at, with fast, flowy berms, rollers and doubles.

### SLEEPING AND EATING

You're spoilt for choice here — pubs with great food and accommodation fill the Forest of Dean and follow the River Wye, while the towns of Coleford and Monmouth are very close too. The Cannop trail centre cafe has decent grub; try the hog roast if you're there on a weekend.

### FIXING YOUR BIKE

There's a bike shop and workshop right on site, at Pedalabikeaway. You can also rent out a range of bikes; a Cube Fritz downhill bike costs £60 (price includes armour and full-face helmet) a Cube Stereo 27.5 is £50 and a hardtail will set you back £25. You can demo a Bird bike too but it'll cost you £50 for half a day (buy one and you get the money back). [pedalabikeaway.co.uk](http://pedalabikeaway.co.uk)

### WHAT TO RIDE

The green family trails are fine on a fully rigid bike, but step up to the blue and you'll want a good quality hardtail, or short-travel full-susser. Tackling the downhill trails, a full-suspension bike with at least 140mm travel is preferable. If you've got a full-face helmet and armour, wear it because it's rocky and fast at the FoD.

### BEST OF THE REST

You're within an hour's drive of Cwmcarn trail centre for man-made stuff, or the Black Mountains if you're keen on big-mountain natural stuff. Or try the Brecon Beacons for one of our favourite winter rides, [po.st/brecon](http://po.st/brecon)



Loading DH bikes for another bite of the cherry



# Route of





# all evil

*Sometimes the ride  
in your head is easier  
than the ride in reality,  
as Sam Mainey finds  
out in Ennerdale*

*Words & photos: Sim Mainey*





love maps. In fact, I'm an obsessive. I love unfolding them and watching as huge sections of the country are revealed in front of me. I'm looking for lines, contours and dots, anything that hints at a good ride.

Then begins the real examination; routes are provisionally pieced together and then cross-checked on Google Earth to see just how feasible they might be. What does the terrain look like? How obvious is the path? What can I see along the way?

Sometimes a route gets stuck in my head and becomes an obsession in itself. It becomes something I know I have to do. So it was with this route.

The Lakeland loop I'd become obsessed with involved going from Ennerdale valley, over Scarth Gap pass, down to Buttermere, along the

side of the lake before heading back up to Red Pike, skirting across the ridge and then dropping back into Ennerdale. A pretty simple loop, not much navigation required and, looking on the map, it shouldn't be too long — but with plenty of time to get the camera out for some nice photos along the way.

I'd been looking at this route for years. I'd heard stories about sections of it but hadn't heard of anyone doing the full loop I'd conjured up. Phrases like 'unrideable', 'beyond my skill level' and 'a walk with a bike' were mentioned online, but I dismissed them. The route looked far too good on paper and screen to be that unachievable. I reasoned that those people must be typical internet moaners and, besides, I'm decent enough on a bike to tackle most things that come my way.

Denial, pig-headedness and trail myopia can get you a long way.

## BIG PROMISES

I'd managed to talk two friends, Dan and Sam, to come with me on this trip. I promised big mountain trails with plenty of fun descents and, judging by the forecast, some decent weather too. I sweetened the deal with a night in a youth hostel and a couple of beers... and I was suitably vague about the amount of ascending needed to do the fun descents.

We assemble at Ennerdale YHA at midday and, after the usual faff that accompanies any ride, we head down the valley to Scarth Gap Pass. Spinning along the fire road with the rugged Western fells surrounding us, I feel good. I love this part of the Lakes — it's quiet to the point of being overlooked entirely, with Wasdale and Scafell Pike drawing the majority of traffic to the south, and Keswick and the Central Fells to the east.

Thud, thud, thud, the sound of a rescue helicopter reaches us before it appears, passing



Sam picks a path down Scarth Gap Pass



Britain's Strongest Man comes to Ennerdale Valley





**PHRASES LIKE 'UNRIDEABLE',  
'BEYOND MY SKILL LEVEL' AND  
'A WALK WITH A BIKE' WERE  
MENTIONED... I DISMISSED THEM**



The distant drone of a  
helicopter is easy to  
ignore... for now

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Crazy paving tumbles  
down to a wild  
Lakeland garden

over where we are heading and dropping into a neighbouring valley. Probably rescuing some idiot who has bitten off more than they can chew on the top of a fell...

Portage. Hike-a-bike. Carrying. There's no getting round the fact that if you ride in the mountains then at some point your bike will be riding you, slung across your back as you do your best packhorse impression up the hill. A friend of mine once said, "It keeps you honest," and I have no idea what he means, but it sounds kind of right, like having to suffer for the opportunity to experience pleasure.

The carry up Scarth Gap is, thankfully, over pretty quick. Dan and Sam aren't complaining about lugging their bikes on their backs so I figure we're all good, especially now we get to reverse things and ride downhill instead. The trail from Scarth Gap down to Buttermere starts well, a bit of a swoop and a few lumps of Lakeland rock to hop over, before turning into a steep waterfall made of loose, sharp and, in places, wet rock.

Sam rolls up to the first section, eyes it up and drops in, putting his front wheel right in the gap between two rocks, his back wheel following perfectly. He brakes on the one small flat section before hopping the back wheel around and letting the front roll on and downwards. Dan follows, stalls and jumps off the bike. He pushes back up for another stab, this time getting it right. The two of them repeat this for the camera a couple of times.

I, on the other hand, push down. I know this is at the limit of my abilities, plus I'm carrying a load of camera gear and I'm old enough to not feel pressurised into doing anything silly. The trail is utterly vague, line choice is a case of pick one and



Two go mad  
on Warnscale

go with it, while wheel-stopping gaps, drops and rocks all clamour for attention. Stopping is hard; starting again is harder still.

The trail eventually filters down from wide rock motorway to tight dirt singletrack, encouraging us to stay off the brakes and get some speed up. Dan and Sam are bouncing off each other, as well as rocks, small jumps, and anything else they see. I lag behind, my arms tired from the battering and my brain throbbing from over-thinking where to point my front wheel. I make them repeat sections for the camera, hoping to wear them down and even things out a bit. It doesn't work — instead they revel in challenging each other to clear



Just keeping myself  
honest... again





# ENDURA



## MT500

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Carry on up the Pike:  
hardly comedy gold

various bits of hideous-looking trail requiring pinpoint accuracy. I'm glad they are enjoying the route... but I can't escape the thought that I'm not having quite so much fun myself.

## STAIRWAY TO HELL

I cannot even begin to describe the utter, unrelenting tedium of carrying a bike up a never-ending procession of uneven steps. At first I'm impressed that there are steps up to Red Pike at all — like the drystone walls that cut across the fells, they're testament to man's bloody-minded determination to impose his will upon the landscape. But after a while I'm at a loss as to why some idiot has decided to build a bloody staircase up the side of a flipping mountain. This is supposed to be a bridleway! There's nothing on my OL4 map about it being one long stairway to the heavens.

My bike, combined with the weight of my camera gear and all the other paraphernalia needed for a day on the hill, is literally bringing me down. My shoulders ache. My lower back hurts. Sweat is dripping from me — and we're not even halfway up yet.

I retreat to a safe, calm place in my mind and concentrate on putting one foot in front of the other. The other two must be suffering as much as me, but they're doing a far better job of hiding it as they march up the hill, stopping occasionally to keep me in sight. The steps get steeper. I imagine riding down them rather than carrying up them — although today I know I'd struggle in either direction.

The final pull, or carry, to the summit of Red Pike is stair-free. Instead it's a scramble on steep, loose, sharp rock which slides around under my FiveTens, adding to the instability of having a bike hung from my back. Topping out, I drop the bike to the ground, take my pack off and stand upright for the first time in half a day. There's not a breath of wind as we look out across the surrounding fells, not even a light breeze to chill the sweat on our backs. It's coming up to six o'clock and the sun is starting to sink, sending warm light into the valleys around us.

Aware that we're running a little behind schedule we keep moving, following the ridgeline up to High Stile. Brief moments of freewheeling soon turn to more pushing and carrying as we scale rocky outcrops following the cairns. The trail is non-existent; the ground is strewn with sunken rocks and it's a case of freestyling from point to



As long as I gaze on  
Ennerdale sunset...

## I PUSH DOWN. AGAIN. I'M KNACKERED. I MAY BE BACK ON MY BIKE BUT IT'S STILL RIDING ME

point. Where I fail to see a rideable line Dan and Sam are making good progress so I follow them, trusting their judgement and my suspension to see me through.

On coming to a scree field we stop. There's an ugly-looking gully slashed into the side of the mountain and it's full of the kind of rock that is ready to tear flesh and rubber. Sam reckons it's doable, but Dan's not so sure. Sam clears it on his second attempt and, now he's seen it's possible, Dan gets it first time. I push down. Again. I'm knackered. I may be back on my bike but it's still riding me.

This was supposed to be *my* ride. I'd seen this route, I'd planned it, I'd waited and waited to actually make it happen and here I am watching my mates having a laugh while I am only just surviving. I ride sections I normally wouldn't or shouldn't out of pure stubbornness, determined to have a good time, the sound of my rear rim dinging off rock.

Light is now fading fast, and looking at the map I'm worried that we're running the risk of being benighted. I'm also starting to get cravings for the pie that's waiting for me back at the YHA. Onwards.



If you get down Gamlin  
End without dabbing,  
try it on horseback





Pie in the sky: thoughts  
turn to food as light fades

## DOWN, DOWN, DOWN

Gamlin End is a bridleway. I've checked at least 10 times now. But much like the steps up to Red Pike I'm really not sure which madman thought this would make a good one. The tight, paved trail zig-zags down the side of the fell at a ridiculous angle. I peer down it. I know I can ride it, I'm a competent enough rider — but today it needs more than competency. Determined to get a good shot of the impossible trail I figure I'm best going to the bottom and shooting up. I ride the first few switchbacks fine, nosing the front wheel in, dropping my shoulder and then letting the rear come round, but my arms start to give in, my pack rides up and knocks me on the back of the helmet and I know I should get off. Dejected, I push my bike down the rest of the trail, only jumping back on where it flattens out and skill is no longer required.

I point my lens back up the hill and watch as Dan and Sam rattle downwards, making it look much easier than they have any right to. Then, as Sam exits the last switchback onto the open section he clips a pedal. It explodes, the plastic platform disappearing into the grass. We're still reasonably high up, the light has now gone and Sam has 1.5 pedals. Dan's rear mech and non-driveside pedal are goosed. My lower back is now ruined.

Luckily I can see the YHA from where we are, but to get there we need to get off the mountain, and that means riding back down Scarth Gap Pass into Ennerdale. My regard for my wheels is now well gone, and without the energy to finesse my bike I plough down the hill, again following the ever-cheerful duo as they duel it out.

Eating my pie and beans while sat in the YHA dining room, we talk over the ride, glossing over the horrendous stretches of carrying. To hear us talk you'd think we'd had the best day in the mountains ever.

In a way I suppose we have. Despite feeling betrayed by route-planning skills and the trials of the ride itself, we've had an adventure, we've all survived and there is pie and beer at the end.

"Got any other routes planned?" I put down my beer and scratch my temple. "Well, there is this route I've always wanted to do..."

Happiness really is best when shared.  
And so is suffering.



# This month's routes

## WHERE TO RIDE AND EXPLORE

### 01 HARD ROUTE

## GREAT GABLE, LAKE DISTRICT

24km (15 miles)

If you don't like walking, this route's not for you. However, if you relish a technical challenge, and don't mind hiking to get it, Great Gable is a classic test of man and machine.

From the depths of Bowderdale, the first climb is a savage road pass to Honister Slate Mine. This is the only ascent you'll be able to ride all day, so savour it! Once you've reached the top, it's a tough, rocky descent down to Buttermere.

A number of steep hike-a-bike climbs and rough, uncultured descents that require plentiful finesse and a couple of bravery pills fill the rest of the day. Our highlight is the drop into Wasdale; the path incorporates just the right mix of eye-watering speed and arse-clenching commitment, while seeming to go on forever and ending up at one of the Lake District's most jaw-dropping views.

Be sure to prepare for a full-on, epic day in the mountains. That means spare clothing, tools, maps, and plenty of food, too. And while there are no refuelling points en route, the iconic youth hostel at Black Sail Pass makes the perfect picnic spot.



Be prepared for a full-on day out in the mountains, including lots of pushing!



### 02 EASY ROUTE

## GROVELY WOOD, WILTSHIRE

22km (14 miles)

Easy but charming — this is a ride for everybody who enjoys cruising those chalky downs so typical of southern England. Even better if you time it right and get the autumn colours or the spring flowers. The tracks are all broad and never very techie; and the gradients don't challenge too much — either up or down. But this makes for a fast average and plenty of time to enjoy your surroundings. The drop from Barford Down probably provides the most excitement, but the tree-lined Roman Road through the forest will probably linger in the memory longest.

### 03 MEDIUM ROUTE

## CONIC HILL, LOCH LOMOND

16km (10 miles)

At 361m, Conic Hill is barely a pimple by Scottish mountain standards, but on this loop you feel every single one of those metres in ascent; then savour every one of them on the way back down. It's narrow, pretty techie in places, and the views across the loch are just breathtaking. It's basically a one-up, one-down, with the whole of the descent being a highlight: open mountainside early on, then a little loamy in the woods near the bottom. Balmaha has a perfectly placed cafe and pub before you start the return leg.

### 04 HARD ROUTE

## SNOWDON, NORTH WALES

21km (13 miles)

Snowdon must be on most mtb'ers' bucket list; and with good reason, too. You won't get a more full-on mountain experience anywhere south of the Highlands. The Ranger Path seems to have come into vogue recently, and it's a belter; though pretty full-on and worthy of a decent trail bike and some pads. This is a long way of riding it; but the opening trails all fall outside of the voluntary agreement (no riding between 10am-5pm May 1 to Sept 30), so it pays to time your departure for 5pm. If you're riding in the morning, start from Llanberis instead.



MEDIUM  
ROUTE

## CONIC HILL, LOCH LOMOND

16km (10 miles)

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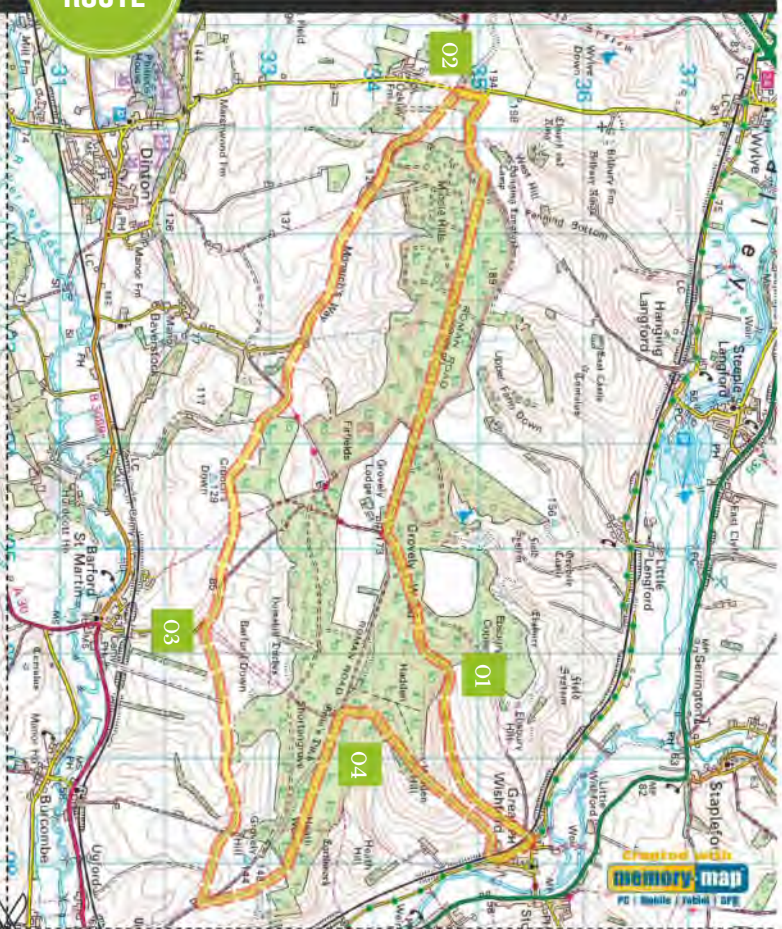


EASY  
ROUTE

## GROVELY WOOD, WILTSHIRE

22km (14 miles)

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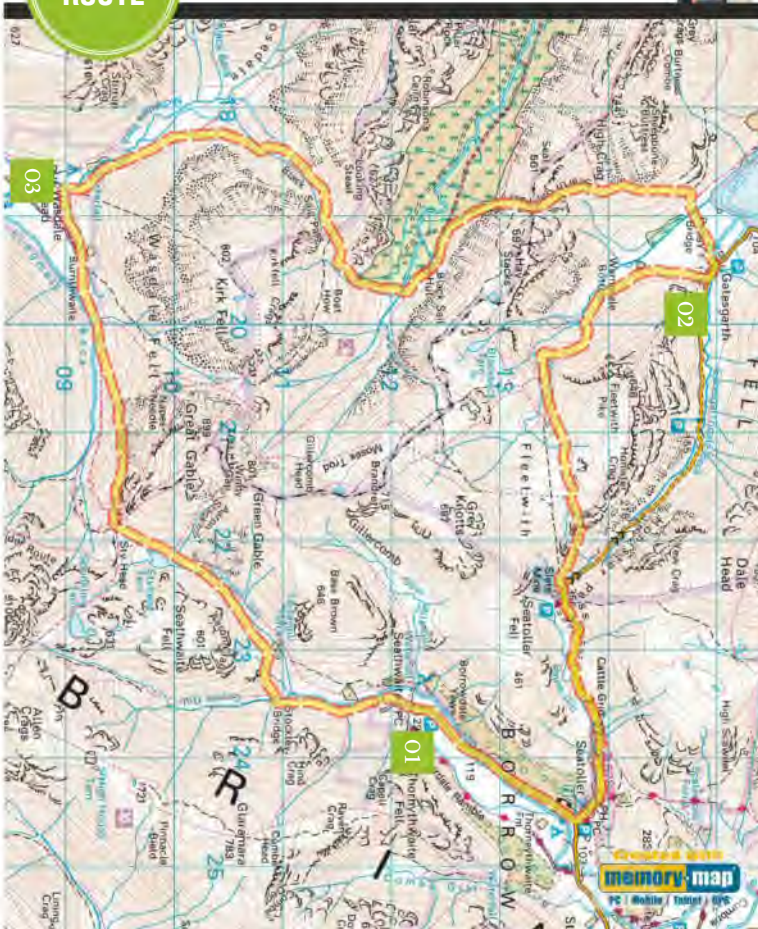


HARD  
ROUTE

## GREAT GABLE, LAKE DISTRICT

24km (15 miles)

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HARD  
ROUTE

## SNOWDON, NORTH WALES

21km (13 miles)

Maps created with Memory-Map © Crown copyright Ordnance Survey 100034184





## EASY ROUTE

### GROVELY WOOD, WILTSHIRE

22km (14 miles)

#### WAY TO GO

**01** **START (OS184/SU062347) Grovely Wood car park**  
Turn L onto the road and climb up into Grovely wood. Continue for 1.5km to some buildings and fork R onto a broad track – an old Roman road. Continue past the Grovely Wood sign for another 3km to a barrier. Keep SA past a barn and onto the road (National Byway). Turn L and after 300m, take the first L onto a track.

**02** **(SU006347) Minor Road. Distance so far: 6.2km**

Keep SA to a junction at the edge of the wood and take the centre option – a muddy track that climbs between hedges. Continue to a X roads with a farm track at some farm buildings and keep SA onto Crouch's Down. Cross this and descend to another junction of tracks beneath Barford Down.

**03** **(SU057323) Junction of tracks. Distance so far: 12.2km**

Swing L then R onto a broad track, and climb back up towards the edge of the wood. Keep SA at the X roads on Grovely Hill and continue to a T junction with a well surfaced track by a barn. Turn sharp L, and then fork R onto a stony track past another Grovely Wood sign. Keep SA into Heath Wood and follow the tree lined avenue for 1.5km until a BW sign on a tree on the R.

**04** **(SU065336) Junction with BW. Distance so far: 17.6km**

Turn R to drop out of the woods, and continue over Hadden Hill, before a great descent drops you beneath the railway line at Great Wishford. Turn L into Station Rd and then L again at the X roads by the Royal Oak. This leads back beneath the railway and up to the car park.

**TOTAL DISTANCE: 22KM (14 MILES) TOTAL ASCENT: 390M (1,280FT)**



#### GETTING THERE

Start from the car park south of Great Wishford (OS184/SU062347). Great Wishford is just off of the A36, five miles NW of Salisbury. Rail users could alight at Salisbury and join the route on Grovely Hill.

#### BEST TIME TO GO

Pretty good surfaces overall but one or two sections will be muddy at wetter times – better in the dry really. In spring, it's alive with snowdrops then bluebells; and in autumn, the beech trees are amazing.

#### MAPS & GUIDEBOOKS

Memory Map V5 OS Landranger (1:50,000) Region 1

OS Landranger (1:50,000) 184 Salisbury & the Plain

OS Explorer Series (1:25,000) 130 Salisbury & Stonehenge

*Rough Ride Guide to the South West* by Max Darkins (roughridesguide.co.uk)

#### REFRESHMENTS

The Royal Oak at Great Wishford is near the finish or well-placed for a quickie afterwards.

#### FACILITIES

The Royal Oak in Great Wishford is an obvious stop-off.

B&B in the Barford Inn, 01722 742242, thebarfordinn.co.uk

The nearest Youth Hostel is at Salisbury, 0845 371 9537.

For other B&B options try visitwiltshire.co.uk

Salisbury TIC, 01722 334956.

#### OTHER OPTIONS

The Croft Trail at Swindon isn't a million miles away. Or we did a great Easy over the Marlborough Downs back in the July 2013 Issue.

## MEDIUM ROUTE

### CONIC HILL, LOCH LOMOND

16km (10 miles)



#### GETTING THERE

Start from the Garadhban Forest car park (OS56/NS479906), a mile north of Drymen. Drymen is at the SE tip of Loch Lomond, less than an hour N of Glasgow. It can be reached by the A809 or A811. Rail is a no hoper.

#### BEST TIME TO GO

A definite year-round route surface-wise, but best out of season as it really is incredibly busy on a sunny weekend in the summer.

#### MAPS & GUIDEBOOKS

Memory Map V5 OS Landranger (1:50,000) Region 6

OS Landranger (1:50,000) 57 Stirling & the Trossachs and 56 Loch Lomond & Inverary

OS Explorer Series (1:25,000) 38 Loch Lomond South

*Scotland Mountain Biking – The Wild Trails* by Phil McKane (Vertebrate Publishing)

#### REFRESHMENTS

The Oak Tree Inn and Village Shop Cafe, both in Balmaha.

#### FACILITIES

Good pub food at the Winnock in Drymen.

B&B in the Winnock Hotel in Drymen, 01360 660245, winnockhotel.com

B&B in the Oak Tree Inn in Balmaha, 01360 870357, theoaktreinn.co.uk  
Drymen TIC, 01360 660 068.

#### OTHER OPTIONS

Good trails run north from Aberfoyle. Other options in the area include Queen Elizabeth Country Park or an ascent of Ben Lomond.

#### WAY TO GO

**01** **START (OS56/NS479906) Garadhban car park**

Follow the West Highland Way (WHW) out of the back of the car park and stay with the broad track, ignoring a couple of right forks. It then swings R at a junction and continues across a major track – always on the WHW – to eventually emerge from the forest. Follow the clear singletrack across two bridges and start the long climb/push up Conic Hill, eventually topping out on a shoulder.

**02** **(NS428922) Conic Hill. Distance so far: 6.6km**

Stay with the track (and the WHW) and keep L into Bealach Ard to start a superb, technical descent with plenty of steps and steep sections (it can be very busy so care is required). You'll eventually reach a wood, where you keep SA (still WHW) down to a drive and then R (WHW) to drop to the road.

**03** **(NS418909) Road at Balmaha. Distance so far: 8.9km**

Turn L and ride through the village, continuing for another 2km to Milton of Buchanan. Continue almost out of the village and then turn L into Creity Hall Road. Follow this up, where it becomes a forest track. Ignore a RH turn and continue up, eventually meeting the WHW where you rode out. Turn R to retrace your tracks back to the car park.

**TOTAL DISTANCE: 16KM (10 MILES) TOTAL ASCENT: 530M (1,739FT)**



## HARD ROUTE

### SNOWDON, NORTH WALES

21km (13 miles)

#### WAY TO GO

**01** **START (OS115/SH563551) Snowdon Ranger Car Park**

Turn L out of the car park for 50m then R onto a gravel drive that crosses the railway and climbs steeply to a farm. Pass the house and turn R through a gate ('Path' on rock ahead). Continue up around a series of switchbacks and over a short technical section to a junction, marked by a small post on the L. Turn L to push steeply straight uphill and continue as it eases and becomes rideable. This leads to Bwlch Maesgwm.

**02** **(SH572558) Bwlch Maesgwm. Distance so far: 2.2km**

Keep SA through the gate and descend on singletrack until it broadens and levels. Keep SA to a junction with a road R and a gate leading onto a track SA. Turn R and drop all the way down to Llanberis. Turn R and then first R (signed Snowdon), to follow a narrow lane around to the L and beneath the railway to a T-junction. Turn R and climb steeply for 800m to a gate on the L (signed Snowdon). Take this and now follow the Llanberis Path all the way to the summit.

**03** **(SH609543) Snowdon Summit. Distance so far: 15km**

Retrace the last part of the climb for approximately 600m to the broad, level area (Bwlch Glas) and bear L to cross the railway to join a clear stony track that starts parallel to it. Now follow this over a shoulder and down a series of zigzags. Continue until you rejoin the outward leg and retrace your tracks back to the car park.

**TOTAL DISTANCE: 21KM (13 MILES) TOTAL ASCENT: 1,400M (4,594FT)**



#### GETTING THERE

The Snowdon Ranger Car Park (OS115/SH563551) is on the A4085 between Beddgelert and Caernarfon. It's easily reached from the A487 from Caernarfon or via the A4086, A498 and A4085 from Betws y Coed. Rail's not an option.

#### BEST TIME TO GO

There is a voluntary restriction on cycling on the Snowdon bridleways between 10am and 5pm from May 1 to September 30. Trails are mainly rocky so drain very quickly but the summit is well over 1,000m, so check the weather forecast.

#### MAPS & GUIDEBOOKS

Memory Map V5 OS Landranger (1:50,000) Region 3

OS Landranger (1:50,000) 115 Snowdon and Caernarfon

OS Explorer Series (1:25,000) OL 17 Snowdon

*Wales Mountain Biking* by Tom Hutton (Vertebrate Publishing)

#### REFRESHMENTS

Best coffee in Llanberis is Y Pantri (summer only) but Pete's Eats is good for breakfast, or there's the superb Penceunant Isaf Tearoom at the start of the main climb.

#### FACILITIES

Great coffee shop at Ty Mawr, Rhyd-Ddu.

B&B at Ty Mawr, Rhyd-Ddu, 01766 890837, snowdonaccommodation.co.uk

Camping, Bunkhouse and B&B at the Cwellyn Arms, 01766 890321.

Youth Hostel at the start, 0845 371 9659, yha.org

Great bike shop in Llanberis: Framed Bicycle Co, 01286 871188, framedbicycle.co.uk  
Beddgelert TIC, 01766 890615.

## HARD ROUTE

### GREAT GABLE, LAKE DISTRICT

24km (15 miles)



#### GETTING THERE

By road, take the M6 to Junction 40, then the A66 westbound to Keswick. Pick up the B5289 from Grange and Rothwaite and follow until you get to Seathwaite. Where you see the sign for Seathwaite, turn left. You'll find ample parking along the verge after about 1km. There's no access by rail.

#### BEST TIME TO GO

Being a high mountain route means you should take all the usual precautions. So map, compass, spare clothing, waterproofs, mobile phone etc. Let someone know where you are going and how long you expect to take. Other than that this route shouldn't get too boggy in the winter, although we'd rather not tackle some of the rock sections in the rain. It goes without saying that some of the trails used will get very busy.

#### MAPS & GUIDEBOOKS

Memory Map V5 OS Landranger (1:50,000) Region 4, Northern England

OS Landranger (1:50,000) 90

OS Explorer (1:25,000) OL4, OL6

*Lake District Mountain Biking* by Chris Gore and Richard Staton (Vertebrate Graphics)

#### REFRESHMENTS

Food is scarce on this route but there is an almost perfect halt just over halfway distance. The Wasdale Head Inn is a climbing institution, packed with history, and great for grub: wasdale.com

#### FACILITIES

Keswick is awash with your average frilly-curtained B&Bs, but for great trail access, try the Langstrath Country Inn: thelangstrath.com  
Bike shops – Keswick Bikes (keswickbikes.co.uk)

Keswick TIC, 017687 72645.

#### WAY TO GO

**01** **START (OS90/NY237127) Minor road, Seathwaite**

Retrace your steps back along the valley to Seathwaite and turn L onto Honister Pass. Stay on the road until you reach Honister Mines. Turn L into the car park and follow the doubletrack mining road SA. Keep climbing until you reach the mine workings and turn L to follow the obvious well-surfaced gravel track W. Drop down to a small stone building and look beyond it for a faint trail in the heather. It parallels the small beck on the northern side. The trail will become more obvious as you near the beck then it rounds the side of Fleetwith Pike and descends to Gatesgarth.

**02** **(NY194150) Gatesgarth. Distance so far: 7.8km**

When you reach the road turn L, then almost immediately L again to join the BW across Peggy's Bridge to Scarth Gap. Go SA after the bridge onto the steeply stepped trail. Continue to climb up Scarth Gap Pass to the saddle of the ridge then continue SA down the obvious flagstone path towards Black Sail YHA. At the valley floor turn L onto the track and go past the front of the hostel. Follow the singletrack to a wooden bridge and cross. Continue SA after the bridge on a steep grassy climb that parallels the edge of the plantation (now de-forested). The path is faint but not too difficult to follow. Continue SA to the L of the summit cairn and descend down Black Sail Pass to Wasdale Head. Just before you reach the pub there is a BW on your L beside a small beck. Turn L and follow the BW.

**03** **(NY1870090) Wasdale Head. Distance so far: 15.5km**

Cross three or four small bridges and go round the back of the farm. Continue SA on obvious track along valley floor. At fork after 2km go L to take gradual climb through scree slopes. Stay on this trail to Sty Head. At the head of the pass take the obvious trail descending to L of Styhead Tarn. Trail then becomes patchy, but essentially follows course of gill. Trail soon becomes obvious again. Stay on it all the way to Seathwaite. Join road and return to car.

**TOTAL DISTANCE: 24KM (15 MILES) TOTAL ASCENT: 1,552M (5,093FT)**



# hope



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FIRST TIME FOR EVERYTHING

# MEGAVALANCHE

*Revered and feared in equal measure, for many mountain bikers a trip to the summit of Pic Blanc is only a matter of time. Pete Scullion found himself on a start line pointing towards the foot of a 3,300m glacier this year. Here's what happened next...*

Words: Pete Scullion Photos: Dan Milner





**E**ver since I started racing mountain bikes back in 2000, I have heard wild-eyed tales of the most ridiculous happenings at a race called Megavalanche. And now, many years later, I'm ready to have a go myself.

Now in its 21st edition, Megavalanche is the original mass-start downhill endurance event.

A total of 1,200 riders race to be first from the top of Pic Blanc, at 3,300m, to Allevard, 2,600m below. Thirty-five kilometres of snow, rock and dirt separate the start from the finish, and with that many riders, it isn't just a case of being fast. Mechanicals and crashes mean that you'll be dodging bikes and bodies for an hour or more.

The event begins with open practice on Wednesday and Thursday, before the qualifying races on Friday. These qualifiers are effectively distilled versions of the main event, with more than 200 riders competing on a course of around 20 minutes in length. This involves a mass start, snowfields, technical downhill sections, a variety of singletrack and some unpleasant climbs.

Your result on Friday determines which race you will compete in over the weekend. The top 35 from each qualifier go into the Megavalanche itself, the main event first thing on Sunday morning. The following 35 make up the Mega Challenger, which is split over Saturday and Sunday; the next 35 compete in the Mega Amateur, while the rest end up in the Mega Affinity. The ladies' race is slightly different in that everybody qualifies, but the results of Friday's race determine grid position for the race on Saturday.

What happens in the main race? That's simple. It takes riders off the top of Pic Blanc's 3,300m summit, down two black ski runs and onto a glacier. Once off that, 30km of singletrack, gravel and tarmac roads lead you to the finish in Allevard, at 720m.

## ABOUT THIS SERIES

Ever taken a leap into the unknown? Ever seen something you fancy trying... or that you'd do anything to avoid?

This series is about leaving your comfort zone and trying something for the first time. **mbr** writers take the plunge on something they'd love to do, have been putting off or they never saw the point of — and the result is a unique perspective on the many different possibilities of mountain biking.



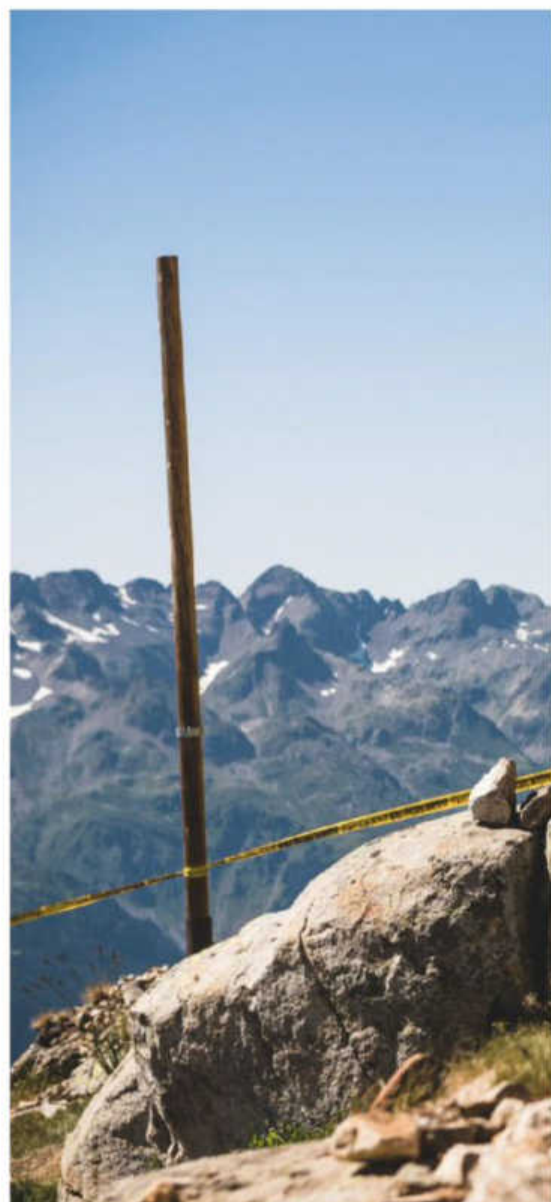
Big mountains, small talk: tensions mount on the uplift



The heat is on: Pete's jersey flags up his qualifying group



Mangled rims and ripped spokes are all in a day's work



## IT ISN'T JUST A CASE OF BEING FAST. MECHANICALS AND CRASHES MEAN DODGING BIKES AND BODIES

### DRIVE AND AMBITION

A full 15 years down the line, and the race I have had on my list was finally within reach. The not insignificant drive from central Scotland did nothing to sate my excitement as mile after mile of rolling French terrain disappeared into the rear-view mirror until, at Grenoble, the sudden arrival of the Alps was striking — and thrilling.

The road to Alpe d'Huez, where the Megavalanche is based, is steeped in cycling legend as one of the toughest climbs faced in the Tour de France. From the valley floor at just over 700m above sea level, our base for the week sat just over a kilometre above us, at 1,850m. The feeling as we reached our apartment for the week was one of excitement — sleep wouldn't come easily despite the mammoth drive, and my mind boiled with thoughts of what tomorrow promised.

Arriving at the Palais de Sports, it soon became obvious that this was no ordinary race. The whole area was swarming with bikes. Almost 2,000 people had arrived to sign on and collect their race numbers. I had been given number 1216, which I would soon learn put me on the front row of the seventh qualifying race, leaving at 11.30am on Friday (seventh wave of 200 gives 1,200, 16 of 200 puts me in the front row). Would I end up being *that guy* out the front with no idea what I was to do with myself? Only time would tell...

I had resolved early on that my main goal was to survive my qualifier within the top 35, therefore making the main event, and then ride my own race on Sunday while trying to avoid the inevitable carnage off the start. I wouldn't be happy with anything other than the main event, and I set about pacing myself through Thursday while ➡





Rock watching:  
a chance to learn  
the lay of the land



Reservoir drops: a  
good line is vital on  
dusty switchbacks



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And they're off... as the mayhem begins, Pete plays it cool

trying to get everything ready early and take on plenty of food and water.

Normally before a big race like this, my brain fries early on the evening before. A bag of nerves, I struggle to eat any dinner or breakfast either side of a terrible night's sleep. But an eerie calm had descended over apartment 205, l'Ours Blanc, on Thursday night. I felt quietly confident that, after a few fast but comfortable runs of the qualifier course searching for lines to keep me away from the bunch, a top 35 place was achievable. It could be academic though — a snapped chain or puncture could see me stopped in my tracks just yards from the start line.

With my first mass-start Alpine experience starting at 11.30am, it was a lazy start rolling out at 9am to make the lifts to the top. Breakfast was not a pleasant affair, and as I suited up, I felt physically sick. Getting out in the fresh air helped, but on the lift to the start I felt the altitude affect my breathing. The mood at the top couldn't have been more different from the day before. The silence was almost audible over the whir of the ski lift, and there looked to be plenty of nervous, pale faces. Keen to keep the mood light, I swung by my mate Miles who was out wrenching for Radon's James Shirley, and we both set about talking nonsense the whole way up the hill. Miles would be starting at the back of my heat and would have plenty of people to overtake ahead of him.

The cable car dropped us at the top of the qualifiers just as the heat before us was being counted down from 10 minutes. The sun was now high above Pic Blanc, the temperature was building, and we were called forward as soon as



Forget admiring the views when the turns are this sketchy

the previous heat had left. Their dust clung to the still air as we waited. I tried to enjoy the moment of calm, necked a cereal bar and ran through the really important lines in my head.

## RAVING MAD

I had been told about the awful Euro dance music that plays as 200 people vie for space on the first corner, and I know many people who have mixed reactions when they hear it. But as the 10-minute board withered to 10 seconds the music was just another noise — I focused on my snap off the line.

The tape went up and we were off. My start was good, but I realised I had no idea what was



The longest 10 seconds of your life will have the cheesiest soundtrack...



# CONCENTRATE!







after the first brow, and I panicked. It seemed the entire 200-strong field streaked past me. Down the gravel switchbacks the dust was so thick I could only hear riders either side of me, but the places I'd lost started to come back. Off the top corners and into the bedrock that led into the first snow bank, I swung hard left on the pedals and let the bunch follow the most obvious line. Staying feet-up on the snow handed me a heap of places, and I started to make progress up the pack. Even a small crash on the second snowfield had minor consequences as my lines were empty and traffic-free.

From here, I only overtook one person in anger. Somehow I had managed to find fresh air on a 20-minute course with 200 other people. It didn't seem to make any sense, but I settled down into the same pace as my practice runs, and only one person galloped past when I took a low, slow line instead of staying high. Across the traverse I felt like my lungs were about to combust and my legs were wooden and lifeless. Again, I managed to pick off a few riders on the last pitch to the final singletrack section, but I lost them again on the one part of the track I hadn't practised. Above all I have one visual memory: a Saint crank and attached pedal lying in the grass about a kilometre from the finish.

The pits were rammed with the thousand people who had already clattered down the hill at various speeds. As I wheezed my lungs back to life and wondered if someone had replaced my calves with clay bricks, Miles beamed at me as he sidled over. "29th, mate... I was 25th." I don't think I've ever been happier. The main event was mine, and my week was made.

I had a day off before the 5.30am start on Sunday morning; a massive lie-in followed by copious quantities of liquid, porridge, fruit and, most importantly, fried chicken. My only task was to cruise down late afternoon to collect my start-line sticker that confirmed I was to start

The dress rehearsal's  
over and now the  
real nerves kick in



in Row J the following morning. Being fairly far back suited my game plan to a T — from watching videos of previous years' events, the pile-up at the start is best avoided...

## NERVY START

Heading to bed while the Alpine sun still hung high in the sky felt very odd, but it was a necessary evil. Even after a decent night's sleep the nausea returned, though again it disappeared as soon as I was atop my bike. The nervous, pale faces seemed more gaunt than Friday morning and I concentrated on trying to keep the mood light with whoever would listen.

As we ascended the Pic Blanc cable car, the sun crept over the sheer cliff edge and bathed us in light. The summit of Pic Blanc, 3,300m up, was still and warm, far from what I was



"OK, the starting  
line is round here  
somewhere"



***IT GAVE ME THE  
PERFECT VANTAGE  
POINT TO WATCH  
HALF THE PACK  
LAND ON TOP OF  
EACH OTHER***

---





## EVERY TIME I THINK BACK TO THAT RACE, A SMILE PUSHES ACROSS MY FACE

expecting. The queue for the toilet cubicles was as long as everyone had told me it would be, and I revelled in the fact that I, strangely, did not need to join it. I timed my arrival at the start to get to my row first, giving me the pick of the positions. I opted to stay far left, despite knowing full well that it would put me closer to the ski netting and the pile-up to come.

A helicopter flew in low as the 10-minute marker went up, and the awful din of the dance music seemed to drown everything else out. One minute, 30 seconds, 10 seconds... The tape went up and we were off!

A deliberately terrible start gave me the perfect vantage point to watch what seemed like half the pack land on top of each other on the far left of the first pisted section. I looked for some room while drifting right onto the rocks and picked my way down, passing bikes and bodies in all manner of disastrous positions. When I reached the second ski run, the snow had been churned into rutted slush and a bum-slide was the only method I could think of to keep the skin on my legs and elbows.

Once I'd regained my feet on the pedals, the thought of cruising 'my own race' went out the window. With riders ahead of me, my race head kicked in and I started picking riders off where it was safe. Riding feet up across a glacier is an experience I won't forget in a hurry...

The opening singletrack was a procession, and opportunities for overtaking were sparse. Then the short, sharp climbs saw my legs come to life and I started snatching places back, the sound of my lungs echoing hard inside my helmet as I went. Onto the traverse again, I didn't think the race finish would ever be in sight. My legs felt flat and lifeless with only half the race done. We made it onto the road and headed down towards Allemond, and it was here I found my second massive gap of the week and settled into a fast cruise to calm the lungs down. Dusty chicanes



flew by and I was soon into a massive series of switchbacks that led me into more traffic.

From here I stayed calm, knowing that passing spots were coming rather than trying to dive inside on a turn and risk a crash. More short climbs split the singletrack sections up, and were the only places where the air was clear of dust. I soon found my legs again, and sprinting out of the saddle won me more scalps, moving me into the top 200.

The last singletrack section appeared far sooner than I expected, and I was caught off-guard slightly coming across the last bridge. Coming to my senses, I laid down everything I had left as I dropped into the school car park, narrowly avoiding the five-man pile-up metres from the finish line. Everywhere I looked, dusty, happy but tired smiles were everywhere.

I had come down in an hour and two minutes, which slotted me neatly into 190th place. That would do me very nicely indeed.

What a buzz, what an experience! Even after more than a decade of riding and racing bikes, here was an event that had not failed to deliver. Everything anybody had said to me about this race was true, and if anyone ever tells you that "you have to do the Megavalanche at least once", believe them — it really does have to be experienced to be believed. [mb](#)

## PETE'S VERDICT

So, would I do the Megavalanche again? Yes. Absolutely. Without a moment's hesitation.

There is just nothing else like it. Even after riding and racing for 15 years, my first time at this race pushed me and pushed me hard — but it delivered a buzz I haven't felt in a long time. Every time I think back to that race, a smile pushes its way across my face. My need to be back in Alpe d'Huez with a knotted stomach, massive calluses, burning forearms and lungs full of dust gnaws at me constantly.

Superlatives or a lifetime of video footage simply do not do this race justice. Please do yourself a favour and have a shot at it. Even if you don't end up in the main event like I did, riding down two black ski runs before you get punted onto a glacier is an experience that will never leave you... and that's just the top 5km!





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ADVENTURE CROSS PROMOTIONAL FEATURE

# Lakeland Monster Miles

## ADVENTURE CROSS SPORTIVE

*Lakeland Monster Miles is a picturesque, challenging route showcasing the full range of what the lakes has to offer, with a full loop of the Skiddaw Massif*

Words: John Walsh Photo: Roo Fowler

Lakeland riding throws some unique challenges at riders and it's not just the rocks and mud that make it interesting. Now in its third year, Monster Miles is the original Adventure Cross event. Steep gradients and relentless climbing, plus a bit of typical Lakeland weather, make it a tough but satisfying day out.

The route starts from Fitz Park in Keswick. On a tree-lined disused railway the first off-road sector is a great warm-up, with a river below and occasional glimpses of distant hills a taste of the spectacular views to come. If you are lucky, bursts of golden light will be filtering through the trees as the valley starts to take on the colours of autumn. Off the old railway you are onto quiet lanes with barely any traffic as you climb up into the hills.

Both the Massif and Mini-Massif follow the same route before splitting shortly after Cockermouth with the Mini missing out a section around Loweswater and the final and highest climb of the day in Whinlatter Forest. The climb through Whinlatter is a long slog up the forest roads, and while your lungs will be burning it is soon forgotten once you start dropping down the trails, losing your hard won height on a glorious descent.

### Technical challenge

Of all the Adventure Cross events this is the most technical. A highlight is the Miner's Track a wild, barren

climb on an exposed part of the course. Rocky, steep and long, you may also have to contend with cross winds and will undoubtedly need to pick your lines wisely to get to the top. The fast grassy descent is an exhilarating test of bravery as you pick your line through boggy ground, willing yourself to stay off the brakes.

There is a real mix of terrain to test both your fitness and your technique. The muddy 'Bog Trotters' sector requires smooth, strong pedal strokes, while the rocky descents will test your nerve and line choice. MTB gearing will certainly help on some of the steeper hills, and a tip to anyone riding a cross bike would be to fit a mountain bike cassette and a 34-tooth inner ring for those leg-burning ascents.

Lakeland Monster Miles has rapidly earned 'must-do' ride status and, as the toughest of the lot, is a fitting way to round off the Adventure Cross season. It's not an event to take lightly if you plan on tackling the full 100km, but with preparation and determination it's a fantastic day out. It has all the components that make Adventure Cross a great experience: spectacular views, wilderness, challenging climbs and whoop-inducing descents.

### WHY RIDE IT?

The original and the best. It is toughest both physically and technically of all the events, offering a full take of the best of Lakeland riding and is a great way to end the Adventure Cross year.



### THE DETAILS

#### DATE

Sunday 4th October 2015

#### WHERE IS IT

Fitz Park, Keswick  
Cumbria

Keswick is the popular outdoor capital of the northern district.

Postcode: **CA12 4HS**

#### HOW TO ENTER

Visit [www.bookmyride.co.uk](http://www.bookmyride.co.uk)  
Entry may be available on the day if the event hasn't sold out in advance



## WHERE TO STAY

**The Royal Oak** Is right in the heart of town and offers quality pub food for a post-ride meal.

[www.royaloakkeswick.co.uk](http://www.royaloakkeswick.co.uk)

**Harvinton House.** Keen cyclist and ex-tour guide from around the globe, host Graham will ensure a hearty breakfast at his B&B and some insider tips on the local trails. [www.harvinton-house.co.uk](http://www.harvinton-house.co.uk)

## LOCAL BIKE SHOP

The route passes no fewer than three bike shops: **Keswick Bikes, Kewick** [www.keswickbikes.co.uk](http://www.keswickbikes.co.uk),

**4 Play Cycles, Cockermouth** [www.4playcycles.co.uk](http://www.4playcycles.co.uk) and **Cycleswise, Whinlatter** [www.cyclewise.co.uk](http://www.cyclewise.co.uk).

**CW difficulty rating: Technical terrain difficulty: 5/5 Wilderness Riding 4/5**

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## MASSIF STATS

TOTAL DISTANCE- 100 KM/ 62 MILES

57% (57 KM) OFF ROAD

43% (43 KM) ON TARMAC

TOTAL ASCENT- 2465 M



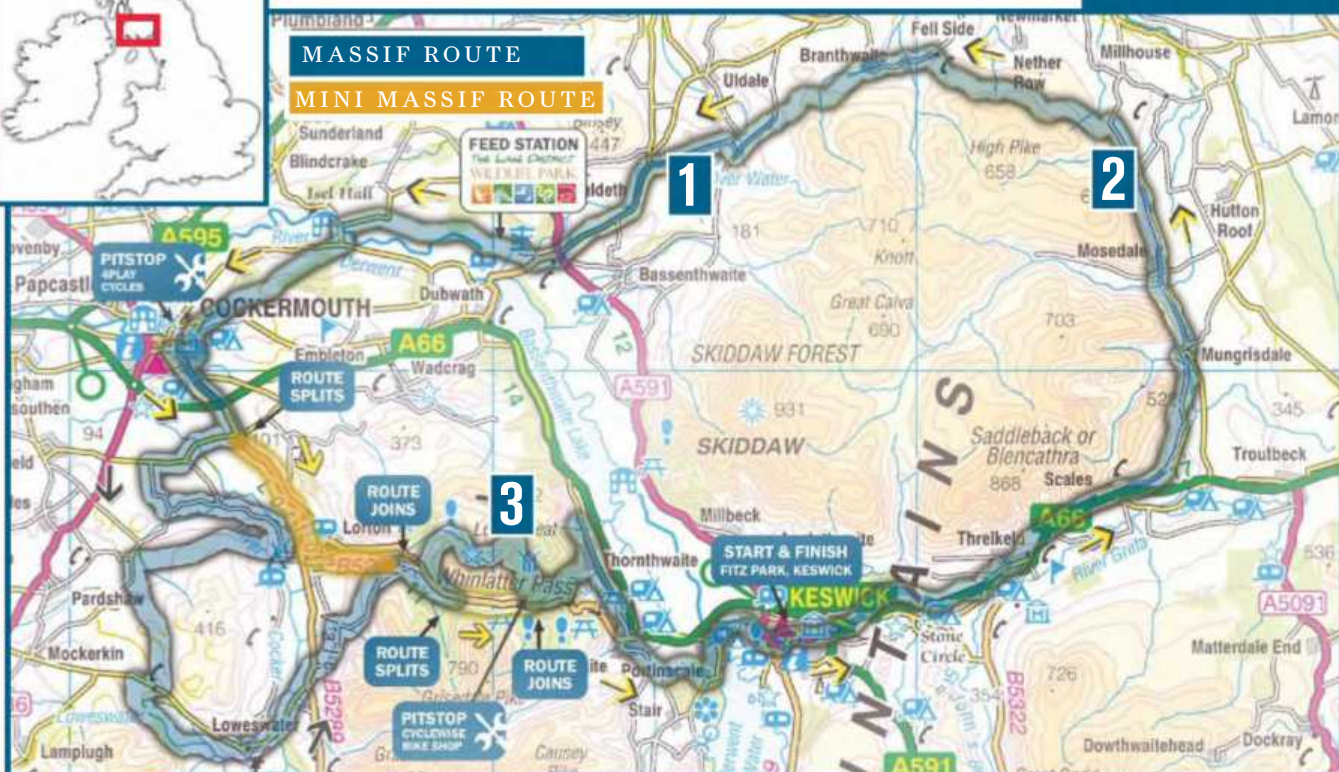
## MINI MASSIF STATS

TOTAL DISTANCE- 71 M/ 44 MILES

53% (37 KM) OFF ROAD

47% (34KM) ON TARMAC

TOTAL ASCENT- 1773 M



## CHALLENGES

### 1 Circling the Massif

The long route neatly circumnavigates the whole Skiddaw Massif, with plenty of steep ups and downs, but also striking views of the mountain itself.

### 2 Miner's Track

Rocky, exposed and often windy, this is a grippy, technical climb that requires you to pick your line wisely and apply your power smoothly. Loose rocks make it extra tricky as they roll and bounce under you wheels.

### 3 Final Climb

The long climb to the highest point of the route in Whinlatter Forest is a real leg-killer. Starting off on a narrow singletrack before joining the winding forest road, it takes some concentration to survive this final hurdle.



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# Q&A

**This month:**  
direct-mount  
chainring fitment,  
aftermarket 'rings,  
chain maintenance

## YOUR EXPERT

**AL VINES**  
Al Vines – Works  
for i-Ride as its tech  
boffin. Revels in a  
mechanical challenge  
– bleeds Dot5.1 brake  
fluid and speaks  
in Nm.



## THE BIG QUESTION

# Can I fit a direct-mount chainring?

**Q** I'm thinking of taking the plunge and going for a 1x10 setup with a narrow/wide chainring. I've seen direct-mount chainrings for sale but don't know how they fit — do you need special cranks?

Glenn Matthews, email

**A** The traditional way to mount a chainring to the crank is by using chainring bolts, but direct-mount chainrings eliminate the need for these bolts (and also the spider) by mounting directly to the crank. The advantage are obvious: it saves weight, increases mud clearance, eradicates loosening or creaking, and means you can run a much smaller chainring if needed.

Several manufacturers make cranks with direct-

mount rings such as Hope, E-13, DMR, Middleburn and Race Face, but they all have different ways of mounting the chainring, so they aren't cross-compatible. The only option open to you is if you have a SRAM crank that can accept a direct-mount ring — such as XX1, X01, X01DH, X1, the 1400er series GX model and the odd OE crank (the ones that come on complete bikes) such as the S-2200. It may seem bewildering but if you look at the back of a driveside SRAM crank and see three T25 Torx headed bolts there, you'll be able to mount a ring directly to the crank.

Unfortunately it's not possible to fit a direct-mount ring to any Shimano crank or other brands where the spider is not removable.



Regular vision of  
your frame save you  
money and skin

## CHAINRING CHOICES

Aftermarket chainrings offer a host of tweaks and changes

### UPGRADE TO NARROW/WIDE

Narrow/wide rings have been around for over three years now. Initially developed by SRAM (X-Sync) for use with its revolutionary 1x11 groupsets, the narrow/wide or thick/thin rings have been one of the most copied components of recent times. It seems every component manufacturer has a narrow/wide ring in its portfolio these days, and while they differ

slightly from each other, they all aim to keep your chain in place. Combined with a clutch rear mech (SRAM Type 2 or Shimano Shadow Plus), most trail riders will find that chain devices are no longer necessary. Most narrow/wide rings work with nine, 10 and 11-speed drivetrains.

### TRY AN OVAL RING

Component manufacturers such as Absolute Black and Wolf Tooth now have oval-shaped direct-mount rings available too. These are designed to accentuate the sweet-spots in the pedal stroke when you're driving the pedals downwards, and minimise the dead area when the pedals are around the 12 and six o'clock position. The result is more even power delivery, which will aid climbing traction. In our experience, they feel odd initially, but they do seem to make the climbs easier.

### CHAINRING OFFSET

SRAM chainrings are available in two offsets — one designed for the oversized BB30 crank with a shorter spindle and the other for the GXP crank, which has a longer spindle. You



Oval rings can  
make climbing  
hills feel easier



Thick/thin rings  
are designed to keep  
your chain in place

should buy the correct offset for the chainset on your bike, but being able to vary the offset can also be useful for getting sufficient clearance and fine-tuning the chainline on fat bikes. Manufacturers have guidelines for choosing the right ring offset on their websites to make sure you get it right first time. Check out [wolftoothcomponents.com](http://wolftoothcomponents.com) for loads of information on fat bike chainline spacing.



## HOW TO FIT A SRAM DIRECT-MOUNT RING

Here are four quick steps to ditch the spider on your SRAM chainset to mount a ring directly



**O1** Remove the driveside crank from the bike. This chainset is self-extracting so no tools other than an 8mm Allen key are required. Check for the three T25 Torx bolts on the back of the spider — these must be present, otherwise the conversion won't be possible.



**O2** Clean out the heads of the bolts and undo them using a good quality L-shaped T25 Torx key.



**O3** With the bolts removed, you can lift off the old ring and spider — you may need to give it a tap with a soft-faced mallet. Give the crank and the bolts a good clean.



**O4** Fit your new ring into place. The orientation of the splines means the ring only fits one way. Apply some Loctite 243 to the bolts and tighten them in place. Grease the spindle and re-fit to the specified torque.

## QUICK FIXES

Using proper chain lube helps reduce wear and tear

### IS WD-40 OK?

**Q** I see loads of bike lube on the market but I've been using good old WD-40. Is there anything wrong with this? Do I need to spend more money or is it just a gimmick?

*Luke Greatorex, email*

**A** There's nothing wrong with using a maintenance spray like WD-40 on your chain, but it offers very little in the way of lubrication. If you want your chain to last longer, run more quietly and be more efficient, invest in some proper chain lube. Look for wet lubricant in the winter to prevent it washing off easily. In the summer, use dry lubricants, with which your chain is likely to stay cleaner for longer. Whatever you do, keep your chain clean in between rides; adding lube on-top of dirt creates a grinding paste that wears out your gears out double-quick.

### FORESTALL FADE

**Q** Will the sun fade the paint-job on my new frame and is there any way of preventing this?

*Mike Gaskell, email*

**A** I've never worried about it, but sunlight probably does fade paint. Then again, washing it also dulls the finish of the frame, and all those chemicals we apply to various components can also strip off the nice polished surface. I don't have any suggestions for

prevention. I suppose you could just ride it more, and that way you'll be either too knackered to care or it'll be constantly covered in a layer of trail grime and you won't see it.

### CHAIN CLEANER

**Q** My chain is really grimy and I just can't get it clean using my usual bucket, brush and Muc-Off technique. What's the next step?

*Geoff, email*

**A** If you have a quick-link on your chain, you could remove it and leave it to soak in a decent degreaser in an old water bottle or similar. A good soak in powerful degreaser overnight and your best vigorous maraca-playing impression should remove the worst of it. If you want to leave the chain in place, you can use a chain cleaning machine like this Park Tool Cyclone. Fill it with degreaser and whizz the chain through it to give it a good clean. Repeat with fresh degreaser if necessary and rinse and dry before re-lubing. Just make sure you don't get any oily degreaser on your discs and pads.



A chain-cleaner cuts down on labour

Got a question about fixing your bike? Email [mbr@timeinc.com](mailto:mbr@timeinc.com) with 'Q&A' in the subject line



# Bleed Shimano disc brakes

*Keeping your Shimano stoppers in tip-top condition is easy when you know how*

**S**himano brakes are some of the best out there but they still need regular maintenance. The brakes use mineral oil, which isn't hygroscopic like the Dot fluid used by many other brands, so Shimano recommends replacing the fluid in its brakes when it becomes discoloured, rather than on a purely annual basis.

You can dismantle the brake to check the colour but there are some obvious signs all is not well — if your brake levers have a longer throw than normal or they have spongy or inconsistent feel. You should also go through this process if you've had a leak, need to replace a damaged hose or have made a mess of shortening one.

In addition to regular tools you'll need an SM-DISC bleeding tool (£4), a 7mm ring spanner and a Shimano bleed kit (839 980 – £9.99), which consists of some mineral oil and some plastic tubing. We would recommend substituting Shimano's squeeze bottle with a syringe though, as this makes things easier. Waste oil can be caught in a plastic bag taped onto some additional tubing, but you can easily make a better device with an old drinks bottle. The yellow bleed block/spacer shown in this article should have come with the brakes when new.

If you don't have one you should be able to easily obtain one from your LBS.



## TOOLS FOR THE JOB

● Shimano Mineral Oil, SM-DISC Bleeding Tool, tubing and receptacle for old fluid, bleed block, syringe, 7mm ring spanner

## NEED TO KNOW

- **TIME TAKEN**  
30min per brake
- **SKILL LEVEL**  
Moderate
- **MONEY SAVED**  
Around £25 per end
- **GOT INTO TROUBLE?**

If things don't work right you can always repeat the bleed process. Use your friendly local bike mechanic as a last resort.

## GET MORE

Watch a video tutorial by scanning this code, or by visiting [po.st/ShimanoBleed](http://po.st/ShimanoBleed)

## YOUR EXPERT

**AL VINES**  
Works for i-Ride as its tech boffin. Revels in a mechanical challenge — bleeds Dot5.1 brake fluid and speaks in Nm.



**01** Remove your pads by bending the split pin straight, withdrawing it from the caliper and lifting out the pads. Shimano XT and XTR brakes use a bolt rather than a split pin. Fit the bleed block in place and refit the pin/bolt.



### WARNING

Mineral oil isn't half as evil as Dot fluid, but gloves and eye protection are strongly recommended

**02** Rotate the brake lever so it's level to the ground. Remove the bleed screw and O-ring from the reservoir and screw the bleed tool, minus plunger, into place as shown.



**03** Place the 7mm ring spanner onto the bleed nipple. Fill the syringe with oil (expel any air). Fit syringe to the bleed nipple. Open the nipple with the spanner and push the fluid from the syringe into the bleed tool until air ceases to be expelled with the fluid into the bleed tool. Close the nipple.







**04** Do not squeeze the lever at this point. Remove the syringe and attach the oil catching contraption.



### TOP TIP

While oil is flowing through you can tap the lever, hose and caliper with a non-marring tool to agitate air from the system



**05** Open the nipple, allowing oil to flow from the bleed tool into the bottle. On a rear brake you may need to remove the caliper from the frame and allow it to hang freely so gravity can take effect. Keep the bleed tool topped with oil to prevent air being sucked in.

**06** Close the nipple when you are happy there is no air in the system. Refit the caliper if removed.



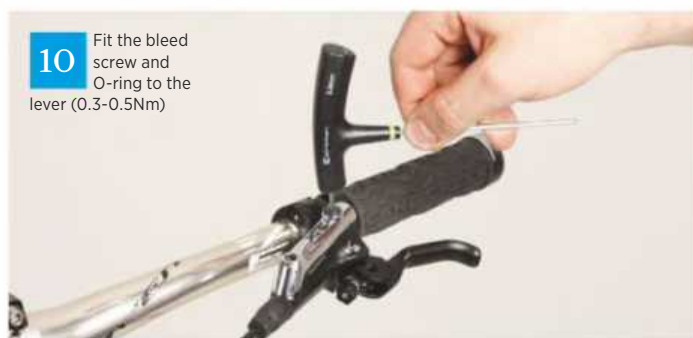
**07** With the lever squeezed, rapidly open and close the bleed nipple (half second bursts) two-three times. Remove the bottle and fully tighten the bleed nipple (4-6Nm).



**08** Pull the brake lever repeatedly until bubbles stop rising into the bleed tool. Perform this again with the lever raised about 30 degrees above horizontal and again at about 30 degrees below horizontal.



**09** Position the lever level with the ground once more. Add the stopper to the bleed tool and remove the bleed tool but do not pull the lever.



**10** Fit the bleed screw and O-ring to the lever (0.3-0.5Nm)



**11** Remove any spilt oil, reposition the lever back to its normal angle, remove the bleed block and refit the pads and wheel. Now you can pull the lever to see if the bleed worked as intended.



## FROM RACE TO TRAIL

## ENDURO SKILLS FOR

*Riding technique isn't the only thing we can learn from enduro racers. Performance starts with preparation — and so should you*

Words and photos: Roo Fowler



## YOUR COACH

Toby Pantling began his racing in the world of downhill, but with the advent of enduro he has found a style of racing that perfectly reflects the kind of riding he enjoys most. With over 10 years' racing experience, he has a wealth of knowledge that has helped him to category wins in races such as the Scottish Enduro series and the Trans Provence.

## ABOUT TOBY

**Team:** Orange/Mojo  
**Trail bike:** Orange Five  
**From:** Guildford, Surrey  
**Age:** 31



One of the things we've always loved about enduro racing is its similarity to the trail riding most of us do at every opportunity. Without the benefits of an uplift, riders need to be able to tackle a long day in the saddle, with the physical and technical ability to handle climbs an essential part of the experience. But as important as it is to cover the miles and cope with the climbs, the focus is inevitably on the challenge and thrills of the downhill sections.

Regular trail riders can learn a lot from enduro racers. From set-up and nutrition to riding blind and tackling super-technical sections, enduro is like everyday riding pushed to the max. We asked experienced racer Toby Pantling for his advice on how to improve out on the trail.

Every enduro is made up of timed stages that dictate each rider's overall time and ranking. But between those race stages are stretches of riding known as transition or liaison stages. The time taken to ride these transitions isn't counted towards your

final race position, although the amount of time you have to complete them is often limited; exceed it and you'll receive a penalty for being late.

To kick off our enduro skills two-parter, we're focusing on those transition stages. They may not contribute directly to your overall time, but they're your big chance to fix mechanical issues or grab a snack before arriving at the start of the next stage to battle the clock once again. Therefore the factors we are looking at here rely upon preparation, maintenance and mental attitude — which may not be the world's sexiest buzzwords, but that doesn't make them any less important...

**We can learn a lot from enduro: it's like everyday riding pushed to the max**



# TRAIL RIDERS



## WATCH THE VIDEO

Let Toby show you how it's done — just go to [po.st/enduro1](http://po.st/enduro1)



## TOBY'S PRO TWEAKS

You don't want to be changing set-up on the fly. Here's your guide to getting the bike right before you hit the trail.

**01** Pro tweaks such as swapping the Fox Doss seatpost control for an XTR shifter (see [po.st/DropperRemote](http://po.st/DropperRemote)) aren't just about marginal gains. They are also a way of proving to yourself that you've got your bike as sorted as can be.

**02** Stick flat pedals on once in a while to remind yourself how loose you can be on the bike. They can also help give you that little extra confidence when riding or racing trails blind.

**03** Play with your tyre pressures. Get to know what you can get away with, taking into account your weight, your riding style and the terrain you ride on. Don't just rely on a pump pressure gauge — use a digital one to be sure.



Thoughtful cable routing will help reliability no end

**04** Think carefully about the cable-routing on the bike. Spend some time sorting it properly to keep things quiet and out of the way of potential danger.



Track pumps are rarely accurate — use a digital gauge



## TECHNIQUE



Keep your bike running like a well-oiled machine

## LAST-MINUTE LUBE

Before setting out on a day's racing or riding, if there's one last-minute bit of bike maintenance you should do, it's to get the oil out and lube the accessible moving parts. It only takes a minute and has the double-whammy of prolonging the life of those valuable components while also improving their efficiency.

Start with the chain; if it's clean, go ahead and dribble on some oil, then wipe off any excess to avoid attracting excess dirt. If it's dirty, at least run it through a rag thoroughly first before you apply the lubricant. The chain isn't the only thing that responds well to a little bit of TLC — forks, rear shock and dropper post will all benefit if you rub a little suspension fluid around the stanchions, cycle the fork/shock/post through its movement a few times and then wipe off any excess.



Lube stanchions, cycle, then wipe off any excess oil

## LAYER UP

Thanks to our notoriously unpredictable weather here in the UK, deciding what to wear as you head into the elements for an equally unpredictable period of time is crucial to both enjoyment and to your health. Enduro races are particularly tricky; you can be racing flat-out, then climbing up for the next stage in the dry, then the next minute you're waiting for your slot at the top of a hill in the wind and rain. Real-life riding isn't much different. You could be waiting for your mate to fix a puncture or chasing him full-pelt down the trail, and if you're sensible you'll dress appropriately for either circumstance.

The key is layering; having one or two layers that you can quickly add or remove is the way to go. Your choices can be limited regarding covering your legs up, but with your upper body it's always advisable to carry three layers, either worn or with one or two in your bag. Ideally you'd have a base layer, a mid layer and a waterproof, which will keep you covered for all but the most extreme conditions here in the UK.



Versatility is key for riding in the unpredictable UK

## PACE YOURSELF

On an enduro race day, if there is ample time between race stages, you may as well take it easy on the transitions. Likewise, if you're out for a fun ride, you'll enjoy it more if you have that extra bit of zip in your legs for the fun stuff. Pick an easy gear and spin up the climbs rather than mashing up fast or in a hard gear. Then, once you get to the next descent, you can attack it even harder.

It's good to get to the end of your ride knowing you've earned that post-exercise pint, but that doesn't necessarily mean you should race up the first climb; take those first few uphill at a more relaxed pace, and you'll find later on in the ride you have extra energy.



Save your energy on the climbs for the fun stuff



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## TECHNIQUE



Replacing worn parts here is far easier than out on the trail

## GET RID OF THE EXCUSES

If you have complete confidence in your gear and know that you've put the time into setting up and maintaining all the critical components on your bike, you know that any mistakes or mechanicals will be down to the way you're riding or genuine bad luck.

If you know your gear is 100 per cent up to the job, not only will you have fewer irritating mechanicals while you're out on the trail, but your riding will improve. This can include such minor things as changing gear cables once they start getting sticky or frayed, swapping to some grippier tyres if



Small adjustments add up to big gains

it's decided to hammer it down with rain the day before you ride, and checking your disc calipers are properly aligned and tight.



Will that unknown jump save time or land you in trouble?

## STAY FUELLED

Trail riding can be so fun and involving that it's easy to forget about food and hydration. But the old saying, 'eat before you're hungry and drink before you're thirsty' couldn't be more true than when it comes to pedalling a mountain bike around. You may feel full of energy now, but half an hour down the line you may be struggling. Eat now, and half an hour later you will be feeling better.

After around 1.5 hours of exercise with no food, you will start to lose energy, even if you don't notice it. Keeping water on you at all times is the bare minimum, but adding an energy drink powder to it, taking some gels along or keeping some bars in your pocket will go a long way to maintaining your energy and enthusiasm levels over a ride.



Topping up the tank is vital for performance

## REDUCE THE RISKS

It's not just the riders who need to make it through a race stage — your bike does too. One of the key skills racers have to learn is to ride within themselves. Novices often find that the red mist descends once they cross the start line, which leads to insane risk-taking, poor riding and a high incidence of mechanicals.

It may not match the macho image of all-out racing, but competing means knowing when to play the percentages. Pick your lines carefully; if there's a dodgy gap with a rock on the landing, is it really worth risking a puncture when you have little to gain? What about that bit where the trail suddenly disappears down and you can't see below? If there's a choppy section of roots and bumps, back off the pedalling and you might just save your chain snapping and ruining your ride.

A reckless move can lead to a mechanical that can ruin your race run and waste all the energy you've expended preparing for the event. But the same is true of your Sunday ride too.

If this is your last chance to get out on the trail before you're back to work on Monday, don't spend your precious time nursing a battered bike around the trail. Learn to balance your risks with self-control and you'll avoid having to make the sad wave that says, "You lot go on and enjoy yourselves... I can walk back to the car from here."



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# Tested

## CAMELBAK SKYLINE 10 LR TRAIL PACK

£99.99

**SPECIFICATION** Weight: 818g • Reservoir: 3 litres • Capacity: 10 litres • Contact: zyro.co.uk

**T**his brand new 2016 trail pack is a pretty conventional size with 10 litres of storage and a three-litre reservoir — but the big change is the new LR or Low Rider design that means the Skyline sits a lot lower down the back than the company's Vault and Charge packs. The lowered centre of gravity means there's less chance of the pack shunting forward on a steep descent and bashing you on the back of the head.

The Skyline uses a new three-litre lumbar reservoir which has all the standard Antidote features — quick-release hose, lockable bite-valve and an easy-open cap for quick refills. It also fits easily in the pack via a new trap-door access at the bottom of the spine. On my Charge the zip has started to pull away at one of

the corners, but those on the Skyline are a much bigger radius and so far still intact.

The Skyline harness has extended to cope with the LR position and there is a rear yoke to prevent the straps moving apart. On the right strap is a new magnetic Tube Trap hose clip. It quick-releases, allowing you to pop the whole thing out, and pivots so you can angle the bite-valve up to your mouth when riding.

The pack has an adjustable sternum strap and wide hip-belt. The latter has two small storage pockets — the left pocket is zippered (perfect for keys) while the right is more like a pouch, but it's ideal for snack bars or gels.

Internally, there's a main hold with a pump holder and, new for this year, a mini-tool wrap with a storage pocket. I've never really used a tool roll before but I will from now on as this one is great. It has individual zipped compartments, rolls up really small, and you can see everything when you need to make repairs or adjustments. Externally, the Skyline has a stuff pocket for a wet jacket, a helmet holder (the plastic hooks on either side of the pack) and pull-out rain cover. There's also a fleece-lined purse for your phone and a couple of compression straps for lashing on armour.



Skyline: the right features in all the right places

Camelbak didn't invent the mountain bike lumbar pack, helmet holder, magnetic catch for the hose, or tool roll. However, it's how these features are incorporated into a system that sets the Skyline apart from the competition, and Camelbak has the best reservoir and bite-valve. Even with ton of gear inside, the Skyline is supremely comfortable

and feels rock-solid even on the roughest descents. Camelbak hasn't always got things right with its mid-sized trail packs... but the Skyline is its best yet, and an outstanding product in its own right.

Paul Burwell



### YOUR TESTERS



#### PAUL BURWELL

Spent 25 years riding in the South and still has the northern accent and jovial demeanour. £4.50 for a pint? Seems reasonable.



#### MATT LEVETT

Rides cross and mountain bikes when he's not at the **mb**r page factory. Like an older version of Beavis (and Butt Head).



#### MICK KIRKMAN

Off for another week in the Alps — second home, tax reasons or escaping the unpredictable northern weather? Who knows.



#### ANDY MACCA

Betted his life savings on renewable energy, hydro electric power and a domestic wind farm. One vowel short of a bingo.



#### ROB HOYLES

Has ridden two wheels most of his life, only recently ditched the engine. Not shy about asking for an upgrade.



# SPECIALIZED AMBUSH HELMET

£119.99

**SPECIFICATION** Weight: 338g • Sizes: S, M, L • Colours: white, orange, black, turquoise, green • Contact: specialized.co.uk

Specialized says the Ambush is aimed at trail riders and enduro racers alike, and it definitely looks the part in on-trend fluoro yellow. And like a lot of new enduro helmets, the Ambush is designed so that you can shift the peak up and put your goggles underneath for long climbs or transition stages, which is a neat touch.

Once on and adjusted it feels really lightweight, almost as if the helmet floats above your head, and there is equal pressure from all the contact points with your head. On the trail that floating feeling is exactly what you want — light

and well ventilated but still keeping your head fully protected.

There is a drawback though — I felt like there was a little more movement than I'd normally expect on rough and fast descents; the helmet was shifting forward so much so that the actual shell was starting to obscure my vision. Fiddling with the various adjustments I could get it a little tighter, but the Mindset 360 retention system would often pop out of the front of the helmet.

With goggles to stop excess movement, the problem vanishes, and for enduro use this makes a lot more sense.

Without goggles I could not get the helmet to stay put on rough trails.

It might be down to my head size or shape, but overall the Ambush was a disappointment.

Roo Fowler



# ENDURA SINGLETRACK II SHORT

£47.99

**SPECIFICATION** Weight: 406g • Colours: black, olive green, green, black/ultramarine • Sizes: S,M,L,XL, XXL • Contact: endurasport.com

This updated version of Endura's Singletrack baggy short is made from cordura, a tough, nylon, water-repellant fabric, with stretch panels on the outer and inner thighs. There are also zip-up vents on the thigh, map pockets at the rear and two magnetically fastened pockets on the front. These may fasten well but leave gaps that are slightly too large to trust with anything valuable or small.

Endura has fitted a standard button in place of the less reliable popper on the original Singletrack. The elasticated waistband has Velcro-fastened adjuster

straps and a strip of wicking material where it will be in contact with the skin. No inner short is included as standard, but you can get one with the Singletrack II for £59.99, making it a bargain, since the liner is £19.99 individually.

While the Singletrack II isn't the most cutting-edge garment stylistically, it is a durable and comfortable baggy.

If you're a first timer then make sure you buy it with the liner included, as it's much better value for money.

Matt Levett



## SCORES ON THE DOORS

**What mbr ratings mean**  
Our grading system explained



**1-4** Something's wrong. It's rare, but sometimes a product will have a design flaw or some other weakness that means we can't recommend it. Steer clear.

**5-6** OK — one or two faults but it has potential.

**7** Good — worth considering.

**8** Very good — for the money, we'd buy it.

**9** Excellent — a slight mod or two and it might be perfect.

**10** Simply the best — we couldn't fault it.



# GAMUT TRAIL SXC CHAIN GUIDE

£69.99

**SPECIFICATION** Weight: 51g • Colours: grey/red • Contact: madison.co.uk

While narrow/wide chainrings do their retention job 99 per cent of the time, a chain guide is still recommended if you're racing or riding extreme terrain. And, in the case of Gamut's Trail SXC chain guide, it comes with a meagre 51g weight penalty.

The SXC chain guide bolts onto ISCG-05 tabs, so as long as you're au fait with removing your chainset, fitting is easy. The kit includes different length bolts and nine spacers to achieve the correct chain-line, so whatever brand or style of chainset you use, getting it to run quietly shouldn't be a problem. Small adjustments are also possible, thanks to the SXC's malleable frame — I used an adjustable wrench to carefully tweak the guide into just the right

position without damaging it.

The grey plastic chain guide itself is adjustable to suit chainring sizes from 30t through to 38t. Markings denoting chainring size and position on the sliding scale are useful as a starting point, but I found they weren't entirely accurate.

Despite the SXC's svelte framework, it has proved reliable and tough. Only the sound-deadening rubber band has started to deteriorate after eight months of use. Overall, this has proved an excellent addition to my bike, if pricey compared to the 77Designz Freesolo tested in February.

*Rob Hoyles*



## O'NEAL B1 RL GOGGLE

£34.95

**SPECIFICATION** Weight: 140g • Colours: 20 different colours/lens combos • Contact: oneal.eu

You can't beat a goggles and open-face helmet combination for bombing at speed. O'Neal has a long pedigree in making eye protection for MX racers and it shows in the solid-performing, good value B1.

The range of vision through the clear Lexan lens is wide with good clarity and definition. It didn't steam up in mixed weather and proved tough enough to resist deep scratching. Triple silicone grippers on the strap keep the B1 planted, even on a helmet without a specific channel for goggles. The foam padding does get a tad warm and sweaty on hot days, however.

*Mick Kirkman*



# ABSOLUTE BLACK OVAL CHAINRING

£45.99

**SPECIFICATION** Weight: 50g (actual) • Sizes: 28, 30, 32, 34, 36t • Colours: black, red, blue • Contact: absoluteblack.cc



Designed in the UK and made in Poland, this heavily machined aluminium chainring is lighter than any other GXP spiderless ring. It uses the now-common narrow/wide tooth profile for improved chain retention, and comes in an oval shape that the company claims evens out power delivery. The idea is it maximises the downstroke and minimises resistance by offering an easier and harder portion of gearing throughout the pedal revolution.

After you adapt to the slight pulsing, the oval ring clearly results in smoother power delivery and better traction — it feels like you can push a stiffer gear, or ride up steeper pitches without wheel-spinning. If climbing is a big part of your riding then the oval concept is highly recommended, but I'm not convinced the oval effect feels as urgent when really stamping hard on flat pedals. It may be coincidental, but the chain also got dropped on a rough DH track (even running a chain device), which hasn't happened to me for a long time with a standard narrow/wide design.

*Mick Kirkman*



# London to Paris – where we're going, we don't need roads...

The British Heart Foundation is well known for its bike rides, but one that has grown in popularity recently is its unique London to Paris off-road. In fact it's the only charity off road to Paris! Participants cycle to Paris, avoiding roads at all costs; instead they hit the trails, tracks and paths of South East England and France. One of this year's riders shares his experience and mountain bike guru, Max Darkins, gives his expert view on why riders should sign up.

## A RIDER'S VIEW



Patrick Crampton-Thomas, 40, (above centre) is from Ashted, Surrey.

"It's funny how a random conversation in a pub can change your whole life, but that's what happened last September when my good friend, Harold, suggested we ride the BHF London to Paris off road."

"By Christmas, Harold had recruited the rest of the team. I was joined by four South Africans: Harold and Andrew, Craig and Jo. Andrew's wife, Jenny, came along as our physio and Bill drove as our support driver."

"The training is a core part of the experience. We began gradually with two 12-16km rides a week which we slowly increased. As our fitness improved, the distances grew to 20-30km. Our training culminated in a ride from London to Brighton via the North Downs Hills, a distance of 99km, at a climb of 1400m. By this time, the climbs were much easier."

"Finally, after six-months' preparation we left for our three-day adventure."

"There were around 100 riders taking part. The first day we covered 99km, which was mainly flat, until we reached the South Downs Hills. It was great to cycle as part of a larger group, chatting at the stop points and eating chips with a beer as we crossed over to France on the Eurotunnel."

"Day two kicked off from Dieppe at around 10.30am. It was a shorter 84km day, following a river valley, some amazing French farm tracks and woodland, but there was nothing

technically difficult. We finished around 4.00pm in a beautiful French village where the mayor welcomed us with a glass of cider!"

"The big one was day three, 133km with a 1350m gain! We left at about 10.00am, as we had our bikes fixed by the mobile mechanic. We knew we were on the home stretch when we spotted the Eiffel Tower on the horizon. We finally rode past the Palace de Versailles, where our support team was waiting to greet us with an ice-cold beer!"

"I gained so much from this amazing experience, not only getting fit but also meeting some incredible people. We raised more than £2,500 for the BHF, which made it all the more worthwhile."

"My advice to anyone considering this challenge is: do it! You will need to train but if you build up gradually, like I did, you will quickly see the results."

## THE EXPERT'S VIEW

Max Darkins (below) is the owner of the Rough Ride Guide, he explains: "You don't need to have ridden 100km three days in a row to be able to survive this event. However, as with any challenge of this kind, preparation is key. In terms of your fitness, if you can aim to cover a distance of 60-80 km for two or three days consecutively in the weeks leading up to the event then you'll be fine."



"The ride is not technically challenging; it's more flowing and fast, although there are a couple of tricky single-track trails along the way that you can try out, if you wish."

"Riders with a wide variety of abilities regularly complete this ride. You just need to be determined enough to keep going and disciplined to ride at your own pace. The beautiful countryside, the camaraderie and of course riding all the way from London to Paris safe in the knowledge that you have an experienced support team managing the logistics make this a unique opportunity, I would definitely recommend to riders looking for a new challenge."

## KEY FACTS LONDON TO PARIS OFF ROAD



**Date:** 4-6 June 2016

**Distance:** 300 km

**Terrain:** Almost entirely off-road, some technical riding (though this is limited), tracks, forest tracks, tarmac and gravel paths. This has been given a grade three in terms of difficulty, with one being easy riding.

**Entry fee:** £99 team rider

£199 individual rider

£35 team driver or support crew

Entry fee includes coach and bike transfer for individual riders and Eurotunnel crossing and end of ride celebratory meal for everyone.

**Minimum sponsorship:** £500

**Sign up** [www.bhf.org.uk/l2poffroad](http://www.bhf.org.uk/l2poffroad)



# HOPE RETAINER RING

£45

SPECIFICATION Weight: 42g (32t) • Colours: black, silver, gold • Contact: [hopetech.com](http://hopetech.com)

With single-ring set-ups becoming pretty much the norm on everything from the mid-range up, converting my entry-level Nukeproof Mega TR275 Race was the first job on my workshop list. I opted to go for a 32t Hope Retainer Ring designed, as its name suggests, to be used without the need for a chain guide. The 104PCD suffix denotes its bolt spacing, meaning it fits Shimano chainsets.

With the removal of the two standard chainrings, front mech, frame bracket, shifter and cable, the weight saving was substantial — a whopping 525g. But there's more to this ring than removing half a kilo of flab. Hope's narrow/wide chainring has proved both durable and reliable, having suffered quite a

few rock strikes (read: badly timed Welsh drop-offs) and only dropped the chain a handful of times.

Gearing is almost perfect for my 650b Mega, with the new lowest gear of 32x36 (instead of 26x36) getting me up the vast majority of the Surrey Hills' climbs. Long rides can be an effort though, so it's best paired up with a 42t expander sprocket for maximum versatility.

Rob Hoyles



# B'TWIN 520 MTB SHOES

£69.99

SPECIFICATION Weight: 825g/pair • Sizes: 40-46 • Contact: [deathlon.co.uk](http://deathlon.co.uk)

Having run slightly softer Mavic trail shoes for some time now, the stiff nylon sole on these B'Twin 520s was very noticeable both on and off the bike. Power through the pedals was direct but it meant I started to walk with the slightly awkward gait you associate with stiff-soled road shoes. These are XC shoes though, so are far more at home on the bike than off, a fact emphasised by the tread.

Although the lugs are more than deep enough to hook into mud, and there are fittings for toe studs should you want them, the hard rubber on the sole led to a few unwelcome skating sessions on damp rocks and roots. A firm rubber toe box protected my toes from a few rocks flicked into the air on quick descents, and even with several months of hard use they are showing no signs of damage.

On the upper there are three small mesh panels to keep air flowing as you ride, and while that meant water did get in easily, the shoes were very quick drying. To adjust the fit there's a simple ratchet and two Velcro straps, although if you have wide feet I'd make sure you give yourself a bit

of leeway on the sizing because the 520 is quite narrow. Other than that it's a supportive shoe, with an effective binding system and a rock-solid feel. At £70

this would make an excellent budget race shoe, and it's almost indistinguishable in terms of on-bike performance from shoes costing over £100.

Andy McCandlish



## RACE FACE STRAFE LOCK ON GRIPS

£26.95

SPECIFICATION Weight: 136g • Length: 130mm • Diameter: 33mm • Colours: black, red, white, grey, orange, blue, green • Contact: [silverfish-uk.com](http://silverfish-uk.com)

I'm testing these Strafe grips because I wanted to see if fatter grips reduced arm-pump and improved comfort over longer rides. At 33mm in diameter, these are larger than most. The hardness of the rubber cuts a perfect compromise between comfort, traction and positive feel, while being hard-wearing enough to survive sustained gritty use. There are twin lock-on rings for a solid installation and deep tread for grip. I had to substitute some smaller bar-end plugs for my thick carbon bars as the ones supplied were just too big.

While I often got a numb pinky with narrower grips, it hasn't happened once with these fellows in over four months of riding. The extra thickness adds weight, but for me it's more than worth it for the extra comfort and grip. If you have bigger hands, suffer from hand fatigue or if you just want something a bit more substantial to hold on to, these are near perfect.

Andy McCandlish





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## NEW PRODUCTS

# ERGON BE1 ENDURO PACK

£129.99

**SPECIFICATION** Weight: 1,000g • Colours: black, black/blue, black/red  
• Contact: [extrauk.co.uk](http://extrauk.co.uk)

Stripped to the bone for enduro racing, Ergon's BE1 pack is one of the most minimal on the market. Like Camelbak's lumbar packs, the water is carried low at the waist — the best place for maximum stability and rider movement. A central piece of flexible foam mirrors the spine's curves, and it comes in two sizes, both with a height-adjustable back panel to further tune the fit. It fitted my shape perfectly, and a thick, elasticated Velcro waistband kept it in place.

Enduro World Series racer Fabien Barel helped design the pack for timed competition, and storage clearly takes a back seat to weight saving and ride quality. The solitary upper

chamber has just enough space for a spare tube, pump, some snacks, a multi-tool and not much else. There are elasticated loops to lash a lightweight jacket to the outside and two small mesh stashes — one at the hip-belt and one inside the lower boxy part, which holds the 1.5L reservoir and doubles up as a perch for a full-face helmet if needed.

The BE1 is stable, comfortable and cool and it includes a certified back protector. It's not cheap, but the construction quality, function and design is top-drawer. If you race enduro regularly I'd recommend it without hesitation.

*Mick Kirkman*



## LOMO ELITE GLASSES

£15

**SPECIFICATION** Weight: 26g • Clear, orange and polarised lenses • Contact: [ewetsuits.com](http://ewetsuits.com)

Even on first handling, Lomo's Elite glasses feel far more substantial than their price would suggest. The metal screwed hinges are firm, the frame has a decent amount of spring, and rubber nosepiece and arm inserts meant they stayed in place over all types of terrain. Armed with the excellent clear lenses, they have made their way to the front of my rainy day ride-gear.

I'm not a great fan of the optional polarised dark lenses for riding but if you don't want them, the Elites are available with the clear and orange lenses for a tenner.

A great pair of glasses that I wouldn't hesitate to buy at twice the price. The only real criticism was that the polarised lens rattled slightly in the frame.

*Andy McCandlish*



# HT COMPONENTS ME03 PEDAL

£119.99

**SPECIFICATION** Weight: 260g • Colours: orange, blue, yellow, black, silver • Contact: [ison-distribution.com](http://ison-distribution.com)



Straight out of the box, this super-light and fluoro-orange pedal had a real wow-factor. The magnesium body and signature HT spindle construction results in an ultra-slim, feather-light 260g — or 220g if you upgrade to the titanium axle option. Out on the trail, the clearance benefits over rocks and roots were noticeable, along with a sense of stability and reassuring connection to both bike and terrain. The 10 fully adjustable and well-positioned removable pins on each side saw my feet securely glued to the platforms.

Unlike most, the ME03 pins are aluminium and designed to shear rather than bend, saving the threads from damage but requiring spares to be carried. This is theoretical though, as I've yet to catch the super-slim platform on a rock with sufficient force to damage a pin in the first place. If you have deep enough pockets and a desire for something special, then these are definitely worth a look.

*Janet Coulson*





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## JAMIE'S TREK REMEDY 9 29

£3,500 / 29in / [trekbikes.com](http://trekbikes.com)

## ROO'S COMMENÇAL META HT AM RACE 650B

£1,144.51 / 650b / [commencal-store.co.uk](http://commencal-store.co.uk)







### THE RIDER

**JAMIE DARLOW**

**Position** Buzz editor

**Mostly rides**

Surrey Hills

**Height** 6ft 1in

**Weight** 75kg

### THE BIKE

■ 29er trail bike with 140mm travel and enduro-bike stiffness

■ Newfangled RE:aktiv damper from Fox and Penske Racing

■ Mino Link adjustable geometry to fettle head angle and BB height

■ Internal cabling, 1x11 drivetrain, Reverb Stealth dropper post

**WHY IT'S HERE**  
To see if Trek, Fox and Penske have made the ultimate suspension

## MONTH 6: Time off leaves JD feeling like a newbie

New riders to the sport have it hard. The climbs frazzle their lungs and shrink their vision, and the descents pummel their arms, shred the palms of their hands and smack the soles of their feet. I know this because I feel like a newbie all over again — after more than two long months off the bike following shoulder surgery, my first ride back has been a baptism of fire. My body still aches three days later and I feel like I've been worked over by a sadistic osteopath.

New riders have it easy too though. The sheer thrill of riding, the speed of the trail, the G-force in the corners and the simple sensation of turning the pedals over are all deeply thrilling. I doubt I'll ever be as excited by a ride again, even though it was just a single lap of the Forest of Dean.

While I've been away, Mr Monopoly Moustache (aka Alan Muldoon) has been messing with the Remedy, declaring it too small for me. My bike is the 21in frame size and Trek thinks that's about right for my 6ft 1in frame, so who's right? It doesn't feel too short in terms of wheelbase but I'm running a longer stem than usual, and the cockpit does feel a bit too cramped for me, so perhaps the man with a hairy top lip has a point.

Al also reckoned the Trek's head angle is too steep, and I do heartily agree. Works Components is sending me a Reducer headset to remedy (sorry) the problem. It works by tilting the lower headset bearing and effectively kicking the fork out further in front of the bike. At £74.99 (from [workscomponents.co.uk](http://workscomponents.co.uk)) it's an acceptable price to pay, assuming it sorts the Trek's steering out. I won't be able to transfer it to a 23in frame, even if I get the chance to try one though, as it's head tube-length specific so if it does smooth the Trek's wrinkles I'll be sticking with the 21in, sizing be damned.

### SPECIFICATION

**Frame** Alpha Platinum Aluminium, 140mm travel

**Shock** Fox Performance Series Float, DRCV, RE:aktiv, CTD

**Fork** RockShox Pike RC, Solo Air, 140mm travel

**Wheels** SRAM Roam 30 tubeless, Bontrager XR4 Expert/XR3 29x2.3in tyres

**Drivetrain** SRAM X1

**Brakes** Shimano XT

**Components** Bontrager saddle, bar, stem and grips, RockShox Reverb Stealth seatpost,

**Sizes** 15.5, 17.5, 19, 21, 23in

**Weight** 13.74kg (30.3lb)

### GEOMETRY

(LOW SETTING)

**Size tested** 21in

**Head angle** 67.4°

**Seat angle** 68.7°

**BB height** 348mm

**Chainstay** 449mm

**Front centre** 750mm

**Wheelbase** 1,199mm

**Down tube** 712mm

**Top tube** 618mm

**Reach** 451mm

## IN THE SHED



Commençal Meta HT AM Race 650B £1,144.51



GT Sensor Carbon Expert £2,899.99



Transition TransAm 29 £1,899



Trek Remedy 9 29 £3,500



Vitus Escarpe VRX £1,999.99



### THE RIDER

**ROO FOWLER**

**Position** Photographer

**Mostly rides** Surrey Hills

**Height** 6ft 4in

**Weight** 87kg

### THE BIKE

■ 650b enduro hardtail that's actually available in XL!

■ Slack 65.3° head angle with 150mm RockShox Revelation fork

■ Great spec for the money

■ Order online and have it shipped to your door

## MONTH 6: Testing a softer-compound rear tyre for extra cushioning leads to a heart-stopping moment for Roo

After talking about my search for extra cushioning last time, bike test editor Muldoon floated the idea of running a softer compound tyre on the rear. That's the opposite of the usual softer-front, harder-rear theory of tyre selection, but his thinking was that the extra damping from the softer rubber could improve comfort.

So I swapped the 2.4in High Roller 60a that I'd been using for a 3C version and headed out on my regular loop, which involves lots of hardpack, a sprinkle of loam, the odd rock and plenty of bumps, jumps and drops. Verdict? Maybe there is something in it — the extra grip is an added bonus for sure, and I would say there was an improvement due to the extra damping of the softer rubber too... but the balance of the bike is suddenly upset. So much so, that I had some heart-in-the-mouth moments when the front end washed slightly in a couple of high-speed sections of trail. Safe to say that combo only lasted for that ride!

Now, if I go for softer-compound tyres front and rear that would make way more sense, and perhaps even more so on a hardtail, where grip in general is a little harder to find in the first place.

**WHY IT'S HERE**  
Killer price, killer attitude and the sizing goes up to XL





# JAMES'S VITUS ESCARPE VRX

£1,999.99 / 650b / [chainreactioncycles.com](http://chainreactioncycles.com)

## SPECIFICATION

**Frame** Hydroformed 6061-T6 Aluminium, 135mm travel  
**Shock** RockShox Monarch RT3  
**Fork** Marzocchi 350 CR, 150mm travel  
**Wheels** Formula hubs, WTB ST i23 TCS rims, WTB Vigilante 2.3in/Trail Boss 2.25in tyres  
**Drivetrain** SRAM X1  
**Brakes** Shimano SLX  
**Components** Vitus Riser Bar, Funn Strippa stem, Vitus saddle, RockShox Reverb Stealth seatpost  
**Sizes** S,M,L,XL  
**Weight** 14.4 kg (31.7lb)

## GOMETRY

**Size tested** L  
**Head angle** 66.2°  
**Seat angle** 69.1°  
**BB Height** 335mm  
**Chainstay** 435mm  
**Front centre** 750mm  
**Wheelbase** 1,185mm  
**Down tube** 704mm  
**Top tube** 620mm  
**Reach** 450mm



## THE RIDER

**JAMES SMURTHWAITE**

**Position** Junior writer

**Mostly rides**

Surrey Hills

**Height** 5ft 11in

**Weight** 70kg

## THE BIKE

■ 650b trail bike with slack geometry

■ Asymmetric travel: 150mm front, 135mm rear

■ Cutting-edge 1x11 SRAM drivetrain

■ Short stem and RockShox Reverb Stealth dropper post

## MONTH 2: A dirty weekend with his new partner in grime left James feeling like a smooth operator

**A** West Country weekend proved to be the almost perfect consummation for the Vitus and me — the sun was shining and the trails were running fast and dry.

At Triscombe, I was immediately glad of the larger volume front tyre. The Vitus comes with a meaty 2.3in WTB Vigilante that complements the espresso Marzocchi fork to make a really dependable front end. I was impressed. I'm still none the wiser on how the 15mm quick-release works but the wheel has yet to fall out, so I can only assume I'm doing it right.

The ride at Triscombe also gave me a chance to work on my set-up. I'm currently running the fork at 80psi, which, according to Marzocchi's recommendations, is in the upper band for my weight, so I'll try running it softer. The opposite is true of the RockShox Monarch rear shock, as I'm still bottoming out quite a lot. Still, it's nothing a squirt of air shouldn't fix.

The next day, at the Forest of Dean, the honeymoon

period came to a crunching halt. While pedalling round the car park, I heard an ominous clicking noise coming from the bottom bracket. It transpired that one of the cable clamps on the down tube had come loose. As I pedalled, the slack cable got caught between my chainring and chain. I only wish I'd noticed it sooner — the result was a split outer casing. Thankfully, I was able to secure the cable before it was written off completely and carry on with my day's riding. This is yet another valuable and fundamental lesson the Vitus has taught me in our short time together — always check that the bolts are tight!

Don't be thinking that we are anywhere near divorce just yet though. The rest of the day was stonking fun. At speed the Vitus is super-stable and the suspension is frankly flattering — it gobbled up Ski Run and GBU for breakfast. Next week I want to try out the Vitus's trail credentials, so I'm off to find some hearty climbs to get stuck into.

**WHY IT'S HERE**  
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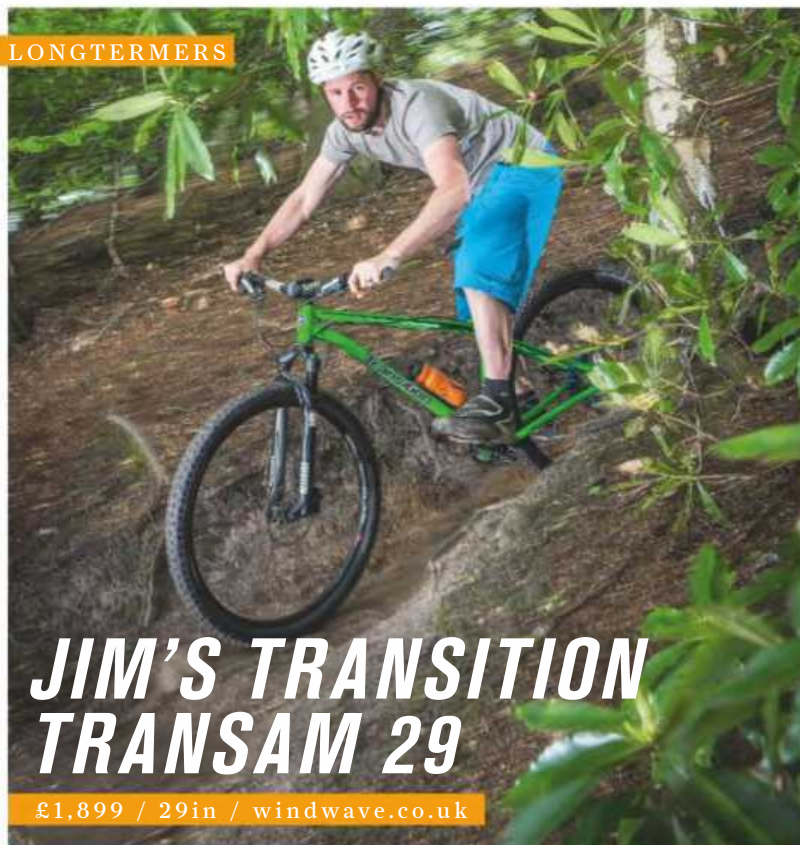
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## JIM'S TRANSITION TRANSAM 29

£1,899 / 29in / windwave.co.uk



### THE RIDER

**JIM CLARKSON**

**Position** Graphic designer

**Mostly rides**

Sussex trails

**Height** 5ft 10in

**Weight** 76kg

### THE BIKE

- 29er 'all mountain' hardtail
- Durable steel frame with adjustable chainstay length
- RockShox Pike fork with 120mm travel
- Available as a frame-only for £499

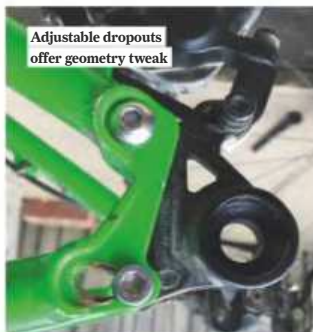
## MONTH 7: An experiment in chainstay length proves inconclusive for Jim

**W**ith the TransAm 29 sat next to me it's obvious that some parts are showing more signs of abuse than others. Everything still works perfectly though, and it's nothing more than the usual superficial rub marks on the brake levers, crankarms and frame. OK, I did forget to flick the little grey clutch lever on the Shimano rear mech to the 'on' position after removing the rear wheel to fix a flat, and the paint on the chainstay is now chipped. Other than that, the TransAm 29 is still looking and riding great.

When I first got the bike, I mentioned that it had adjustable dropouts. The main reason for these is to allow for singlespeed conversion and to get proper chain tension when doing so. There's nothing stopping you from using them to tweak the geometry though, and seeing as I've ridden the bike in the shortest setting from the off, I was intrigued to see what difference, if any, running the long chainstay setting produced.

There is approximately 15mm difference between the settings, and the longest option adds a little more tyre clearance behind the BB. When riding both extremes back to back I didn't notice drastic changes in the handling apart from on one fast, straight descent when the bike felt marginally more stable in the longest setting. It's petty tricky to perform a double-blind test on yourself though, and this perceived increase in stability could have been totally in my head.

So while having the adjustable dropouts is a cool feature, changing from clipless pedals to flats and fitting better tyres have made more difference to how the TransAm 29 rides.



Adjustable dropouts offer geometry tweak

**WHY IT'S HERE**  
A reliably tough hardtail for all-day riding



## DAVE'S GT SENSOR CARBON EXPERT

£2,899.99 / 650b / gtbicycles.com

## MONTH 8: Weight proves the Sensor's Achilles' heel



### THE RIDER

**DAVE ARTHUR**

**Position** Writer/tester

**Mostly rides** FOD/Wales

**Height** 5ft 11in

**Weight** 66kg

### THE BIKE

- Modern, long, low geometry with 130mm of rear travel and a 130mm fork
- Full carbon-fibre frame and swingarm with forged and CNC'd PathLink
- Well-specced with reliable Shimano parts and KS LEV Integra dropper post
- Top-end bike from five-strong range starting at £1,499

On the right trail, the GT Sensor is an absolute blast. With the good weather we've had recently, I headed to Cwmcarn, still one of my favourite riding spots despite its age, and the 130mm Sensor proved more than adequate.

It was fun on any gravity-fuelled sections, where the low centre of mass and bottom bracket gives great stability for blasting through the corners and down the descents. It doesn't display the same sort of playfulness on flat trails and climbs, however. In fact it felt somewhat lethargic by comparison. At 30lb with flat pedals it's not exactly heavy for a 650b trail bike, but it feels heavier than its weight suggests when working against gravity.

And without throwing the credit card at it, I can't see where any easy weight savings can be made

— because the Sensor could definitely

do with being a pound or two lighter to make it as fun on the less taxing trails as it is on the descents.

**WHY IT'S HERE**  
Carbon trail bike with a unique suspension system at a great price



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Made in the United Kingdom







# Disc brakes

*Decent discs are essential for boosting control and confidence on the trail — here we put 11 sets of stoppers through the wringer and assess them for power, modulation and adjustability*

Words: Danny Milner, Paul Burwell, Alan Muldoon Photos: Mike Prior, Roo Fowler

If you're looking to upgrade the disc brakes on your bike the choice can be a little bewildering. Fortunately most modern disc brakes are reliable and work great, meaning it's unlikely you'll buy a dud, but there are big differences in power and feel between brands and models, so doing your research will ensure you choose the best brake for you and your preferred style of riding.

What type of brake you buy may depend on what sort of riding you do, but being able to stop quickly is absolutely fundamental. Power is crucial then, but as the saying goes, it's nothing without control. How you meter out the power is down to

modulation, which comes predominantly from the lever feel. Of course this is somewhat subjective, but modulation is vital, because it allows you to feather the brakes and tune the level of braking force depending on how much traction is available from your tyres.

Modern disc brakes come with a variety of knobs and dials, the most essential of which is reach adjustment. With this you can adjust the lever position relative to the bars to suit your hand size, and to a lesser extent, personal preference.

Hand comfort is another key consideration, because the brake isn't going to be much use if the lever feels too narrow, digs into your fingers and

you can't hold on. A split clamp is handy because it means you can flip the position of the lever without having to remove the grips.

A top-performing trail brake shouldn't cost much more than £120 (per end), but if you're looking for lighter weight or more power, that can bump the price to over £200. You can cut the budget and get a basic brake for less than £50, although you will lose some functionality and it will be heavier. It's horses for courses, which is why we've split this test into three, with four lightweight models, four powerful systems and three budget brakes, and given a recommendation in each category.



# Know your disc brakes

## TOP-LOADING PADS

There are several advantages to being able to remove the pads from the top of the caliper: you can change pads quickly, wear is more obvious and it also makes alignment easier because you can see the rotor from above as it spins through the caliper.



## ROTOR SIZE

Disc rotors come in several sizes: 140, 160, 170, 180 and 203mm. You can run any size rotor with most brakes but you will need a different adapter if you change sizes.

## TWO-PIECE ROTOR

Standard rotors are cut from a single piece of stainless steel, but there are also two-piece designs consisting of an alloy carrier with a stainless steel braking surface. They're more expensive but the smaller braking surface is truer and less likely to warp.



## SPLIT CLAMP

A split clamp allows you to remove the brake lever without removing the grips. The clamp can also be replaced via a MatchMaker-compatible design, allowing you to piggyback a shifter directly to the lever body, saving weight and de-cluttering the bar.



## ADAPTER

Most brakes are now sold without adapters, which is great news if you already have some mounted to your bike. It means you can recycle them and save a bit of cash in the process.



## REACH

To accommodate different hand sizes, disc brakes have reach adjustment. Tuning is done with either a grub screw or a dial on the lever.



## BITE POINT

When you turn the bite point adjuster it moves the position of the main piston over the timing port inside the master cylinder, which makes it feel as if the pads are closer to the rotor. On Shimano brakes, bite point is known as Freestroke, and on SRAM brakes, is called Contact Point Adjustment.

## OLIVES

Spare olives and hose inserts should be included in the box. These fittings attach the hose to the lever, and having spares is useful in case you have to trim the hose when you first fit the brake.

## HOSE

Some brakes have Kevlar or braided hoses, which are less compressive and can boost performance. The hose is usually cut to length for the front and it's easy to shorten if not, although you may have to bleed the brake afterwards.





# Choose the right brake

There are several reasons you may be looking at buying a new disc brake — it might be to replace a broken one, upgrade to something with more power, or maybe save a bit of weight. Whatever your motive, we have you covered, because this test is split into three parts — budget, lightweight and four-piston. Doing it this way means we're covering the biggest segment of riding, rather than just testing 12 random brakes against one another. We also wanted to include brakes from manufacturers that produce more than one model — for example, Shimano makes disc brakes at several key price points and with differing intended uses.

Note all prices are given for a single brake (one wheel) and include a 180mm rotor.

## BUDGET

The most affordable brakes on test are also the heaviest, and only feature reach adjustment, but they do offer impressive stopping power and good modulation. Some cheap brakes use the

same brake pads and similar rotors to their more expensive cousins.

## LIGHTWEIGHT

To cut the weight, manufacturers use high-tech materials in their lighter brakes. Carbon is used for the lever blade, and magnesium or carbon for the lever body and caliper. Rather than a regular two-piece design, the caliper is often one-piece, which is more flexible but much lighter. To cut even more weight, manufacturers run titanium hardware, and pads with aluminium back-plates.

## FOUR-PISTON

As the name suggests, four-piston brakes have an extra set of pistons in the caliper. This increases the overall piston area and allows manufacturers to install longer pads, which increase power. Four-piston brakes weigh more, but are often designed for gravity and downhill use, and as such have heat management features like steel back-plates and special rotors.

## BUDGET



## AVID DB3

£95

**SPECIFICATION** Weight: brake 343g, rotor 161g • Rotors: 160mm, 180mm and 200mm • Contact: [fisheroutdoor.co.uk](http://fisheroutdoor.co.uk)

When our Avid DB3 set arrived with uncut hoses, the thought of having to trim and bleed both brakes was almost enough to bring us out in a rash. And when we got a little of the corrosive DOT 4 fluid on our skin, it literally did just that.

The bleed kit itself is another £30, and you'll also need a workstand and plenty of patience to do get the job done properly. Two hose lengths are available, 950mm and 1800mm, and we obviously got sent two rears.

Pain though they were to set up, our efforts were rewarded by great modulation, a really comfortable lever shape and the best power in the group. The DB3 only took a couple of hard stops to bed in, and from then on it performed with absolute consistency and gave us huge confidence on a



wide variety of trails. With the lever pivot really close to the bar, you get improved control — one-finger braking is all you need. We like the split clamp too, and its compatibility with Matchmaker mounts lets you clean up your cockpit, but it's the impressive feel and power that really makes the Avid DB3 stand out.





# CLARKS M2

£20

**SPECIFICATION** Weight: brake 257g, rotor 167g • Rotors: 160mm and 180mm • Contact: clarkscyclesystems.com

Clarks sells the complete M2 system for £40. That's a front and rear set for less than most brands charge for a set of pads — absolutely staggering. Surely, then, there must be a catch? Well, not really.

Visually, the M2 looks very similar to Shimano Alivio, but in some ways it actually trumps it. For instance, the caliper is a lighter one-piece design, and the pads are top-loading, so you don't need to remove the wheel to fit replacements. It's compatible with Shimano pads too, which means spares are easy to come by.

Setting them up was easy — no cutting or bleeding required. The rotors were a little warped out of the box, but once straightened up, both brakes ran drag-free.

Overall performance was good, if a notch or two below the others. We put this down to a couple of things. Firstly the pads don't sweep the full braking



surface of the rotor; around 3mm is left untouched. Secondly, the lever blade has a pronounced curve to its cross-section, so when you pull it — and you'll need to pull it hard — it digs into your finger.

There's not a lot you can do about the uncomfortable lever, but fitted with Shimano pads, and a 180mm rotor at the back, the M2 should pack a bigger punch.



**TEST  
WINNER!**  
**BUDGET  
BRAKES**



# SHIMANO ALIVIO

£64.98

**SPECIFICATION** Weight: brake 279g, rotor 146g • Rotors: 160, 180 and 203mm • Contact: madison.co.uk

Shimano's Alivio brake is a popular choice on hardtails and entry-level full-suspension bikes, and we've ridden dozens of sets over the past couple of years. Come rain or shine, on smooth local trails, ragged BikePark Wales runs or lift-assisted laps in the Alps, it's never let us down.

Precut and pre-bled out of the box, the Alivio brake is simple to fit, although you'll need to add rotors and the correct adaptors for your bike, as they're sold separately. Bleed kits can be purchased for under £15, including Shimano's filling tool, and the mineral fluid is much safer for your skin.

The lever clamp isn't split, so you'll have to remove your grips and shifters to slide them on the bars. As well as being exceptionally comfortable, it's a very long lever — certainly enough to fit two fingers on — so we ran the clamps really inboard on the bars, with

the shifters next to the grips, to obtain a good single-finger braking position. The flipside is that you get loads of leverage, which is coupled with good modulation and power, to make an efficient stopping system. It doesn't quite have the outright authority of the Avid, particularly on the rear, where we would recommend upping the rotor size to 180mm for most applications to give a little more power.





# LIGHTWEIGHT



## FSA K-FORCE

£269.90

**SPECIFICATION** Weight: brake 200g, rotor 132g • Rotors: 140, 160 and 180mm • Contact: [windwave.co.uk](http://windwave.co.uk)

The K-Force lever has the best shape here, and feels particularly comfortable under hard braking. It also gets tool-free reach adjustment, with a wide range to cover most hand sizes. There's also a Rocker Cam lever actuator inside, which FSA says maintains a linear mechanical advantage and results in a more consistent lever feel. The K-Force also features Quick-Draw Braking, a system that reduces lever stroke, though you can still play with the bite point manually using the red adjuster too.

Top-loading pads are easy to change and the caliper will accept Shimano-compatible XTR pads, handy if your local shop doesn't stock FSA. The two-piece rotor is lightweight, and at £37.95, great value too.

FSA has designed the K-Force for XC racing, which may explain why it's a bit underpowered. There's plenty of initial



bite, but the clamping force just doesn't build and we really struggled to get stopped on steep stuff. Obviously your tyres dictate the amount of braking traction, and on an XC race bike these are likely to be low-profile, but we still reckon the front needs more grunt. Shimano pads may help, as would a larger rotor; unfortunately, that might be tricky, since 180mm is the biggest offered by FSA.



## FORMULA R1 RACING

£283.95

**SPECIFICATION** Weight: brake 165g, rotor 127g • Rotors: 160, 180 and 203mm • Contact: [silverfish-uk.com](http://silverfish-uk.com)

Like the XTR, Formula's R1 Racing comes as a bled lever, hose and caliper; you then buy a hardware kit, which is available with adapters, bolts and a stainless steel or two-piece rotor.

The lever gets a removable handlebar clamp, with the same gapless-style clamp as found on Avid brakes, but we struggled to get the shifter into a position where we could brake and change gear at the same time. This is because the reservoir butts right up against the handlebar, limiting space around the clamp. The solution may be to buy Formula's Mix Master clamps — at an extra £31!

The forged caliper features ECT (Enhanced Caliper Technology) mounting hardware, a bevelled washer system also used by SRAM and Shimano. It's open at the top and bottom for better cooling, and the pads get a semi-metallic compound with



lightweight aluminium backing plates. Bed-in time was minimal, but the same can't be said of set-up — the R1 rotor rubbed constantly.

With its oversized pistons and Kevlar hose, the Formula R1 Racing is the most powerful brake here. It's also the lightest, but the stumpy lever is a little uncomfortable when braking hard; it also needs constant fiddling to run drag-free.





# MAGURA MT8

£269.99

**SPECIFICATION** Weight: brake 223g, rotor 131g • Rotor: 140, 160, 180 and 203mm • Contact: zyro.co.uk

We haven't been able to weigh all the lever blades individually, but we suspect the svelte lever on Magura's top-of-the-line MT8 race brake is the lightest here. Unfortunately, it's a little flimsy, as we found out when we broke the tool-free reach adjustment during testing, and had to run one lever out, one lever in. Not that the reach adjustment is that broad — if you have small hands, you may struggle to get the lever close enough.

At the business end, the one-piece MT8 caliper uses a Double Arch forged construction, which adds stiffness, and the extra material helps with heat dissipation. The pistons get a special frictionless treatment to improve pad retraction and Magura also injection-moulds a magnetic material into the face of each piston to make pad fitting easier. The pads themselves feature

another special treatment to cut down on bed-in time and, unlike previous Magura brakes, the MT8 came up quickly. Pad wear is also improved, but they are noisy in the wet.

The MT8 has plenty of modulation and ample stopping power, but it's pricy, the heaviest on test, and the reliability issues don't bode well for long-term or hard use.



# SHIMANO XTR RACE

£219.98

**SPECIFICATION** Weight: brake 191g, rotor 139g • Rotors: 160, 180 and 203mm • Contact: madison.co.uk

Shimano offers two XTR brakes: Trail and Race. The latter lacks the power-boosting ServoWave lever design and finned brake pads, but it is lighter as a result.

Like most Shimano brakes, the XTR Race is sold as a pre-bled lever and caliper, to which you then add a rotor and adapter. The rotor shown is the top-of-the-range RT99 Freeza design, with laminated construction, heat-dispersing fins and aluminium carrier. Unfortunately, it's only available in Shimano's Center Lock design, so you will have to use the non-Freeza XT RT86 rotor if you have six-bolt hubs.

Rather than a split clamp, XTR has a hinged design with a push-button quick-release function. On XT, this was always a bit stiff, but with XTR it has a much lighter action.

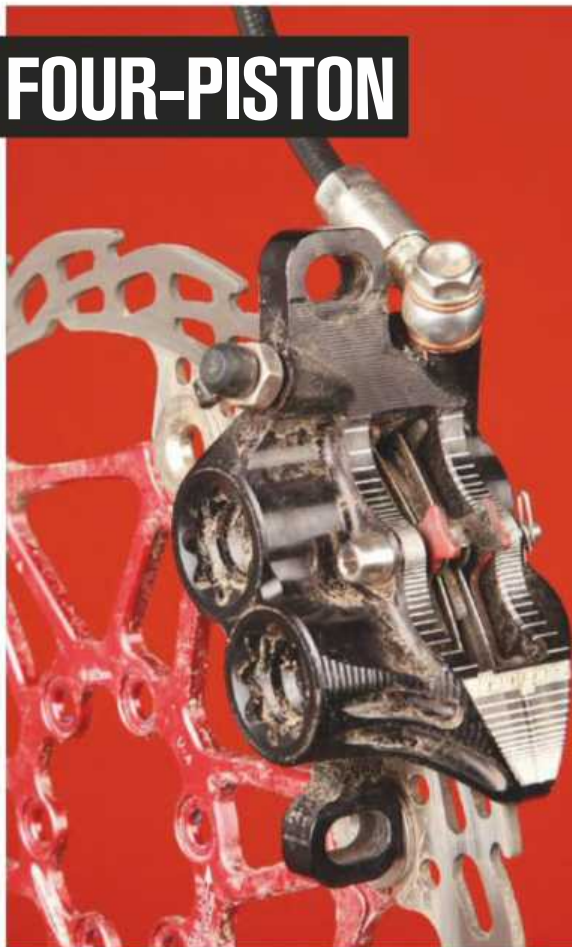
In terms of power, the XTR brake

lacks the grunt of the Formula R1 Racing, but it has a more ergonomic lever shape, a lighter action and better modulation. There is some flex in the lightweight lever body during hard stops, and it has that Shimano trait of pulling to the bar one moment and feeling firm the next. But it's a doddle to set up, easy to bleed and, in this test, absolutely killer value.





# FOUR-PISTON



## HOPE TECH 3 E4

£189

**SPECIFICATION** Weight: brake 248g, rotor 160g • Rotors: 160, 183 and 203mm • Contact: [hopetech.com](http://hopetech.com)

The Tech 3 lever is an option on all Hope brake systems. It has tool-free reach and bite-point adjustment and the split clamp makes it super-easy to install. To reduce handlebar clutter, Shimano I-Spec shifters integrate seamlessly with the lever body, and Hope also offers dedicated lever clamps for mounting SRAM shifters.

Being Hope, the E4 caliper's being machined from a single piece of aluminium is no surprise. And just like the SRAM Ultimate brake, the pads are top-loading for ease of replacement. The caliper doesn't sport any clever heat shields or fancy backing materials on the pads, but we had no issues with heat build-up or inconsistent braking power. In fact, the opposite was true; the Hope Tech 3 E4 offered the most reliable performance in test, with zero lever pump or brake fade. It isn't the



most powerful, though, and would benefit from a little more progression.

All of the four-piston brakes in this test squealed when wet, but the Hope brake was by far the loudest. That minor annoyance aside, there's simply no faulting its consistency; indeed, once we had set the lever reach and bite-point, we never had to fiddle with this brake again.



## MAGURA MT7

£219.99

**SPECIFICATION** Weight: brake 253g, rotor 156g • Rotors: 160, 180 and 203mm • Contact: [zyro.co.uk](http://zyro.co.uk)

This test started with the Magura rear caliper contacting the frame before the mounting bolts were fully tightened — a couple of 2mm spacers fixed that. Then the heads of the shallow Torx bolts for the front caliper rounded off as they bottomed out in the fork mount — shorter bolts cured that.

With both brakes installed, we headed to South Wales in search of some hills to bomb down, but when we took the bike out of the van, the rear brake lever pulled straight to the bar. We pumped it several times, hoping it was just air in the system, but fluid on the floor suggested otherwise. It turned out that fluid had leaked from the piston seals, and with the pads now contaminated, the rear brake was a write-off. At least it will be covered by Magura's five-year leak-proof warranty!

The front brake worked perfectly, though, and had one of the shortest

bed-in periods of the group. Stopping power was smooth and progressive too, without the brake ever feeling grabby. There isn't much in the way of reach adjustment, though, and given that one of the logos fell off the resin lever body after just two rides, we don't hold out much hope for the Magura MT7's reliability either, even if the stopping performance, weight and price are all on par.







# SHIMANO SAINT

£185.98

**SPECIFICATION** Weight: brake 309g, rotor 144g • Rotors: 160, 180 and 203mm • Contact: madison.co.uk

Increased stopping power makes brakes run hotter, so heat management is critical. As such, the Saint calipers use steel-backed, vented pads and extra-long hose banjos to help radiate heat away from the caliper.

Shimano's Ice-Tech rotors are also designed to run cooler, with an aluminum layer sandwiched between two stainless steel braking surfaces. There's even an option with cooling fins called the Freeza, but it's only available in Shimano's Center-Lock.

And it's not just Shimano's approach to heat management that makes the Saints special; the two lead pistons are smaller than the trailing pistons, just like on the SRAM Guide. This means that the extra power of the bigger pistons prevents the pads from splaying to reduce uneven pad wear. We've not noticed this being an issue on brakes with same-size pistons, so it's probably not as relevant as it is with the



longer pads on cars and motorcycles.

At the other end of the brake, Shimano has definitely toned down the ferocity of its Servo-Wave in the lever, and it now offers a much smoother action. There's still a lot of dead lever travel, though; the free stroke adjuster is all but useless, and the power ramps up suddenly, making it much harder to modulate than the Hope or the SRAM. There's no arguing with the Saint's price, though.



# SRAM GUIDE ULTIMATE

£264

**SPECIFICATION** Weight: brake 247g, rotor 161g • Rotors: 140, 160, 170, 180 and 200mm • Contact: fisheroutdoor.co.uk

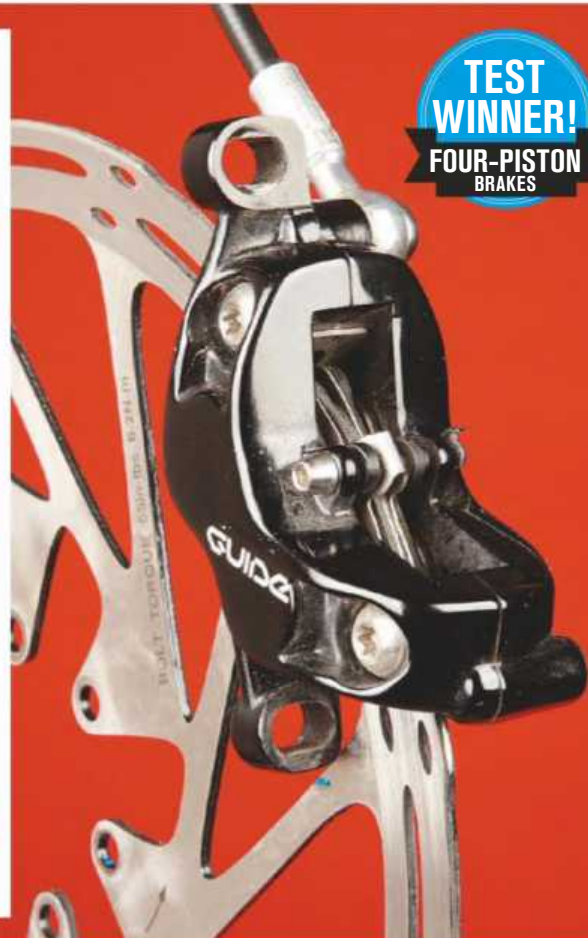
As the name suggests, the Guide Ultimate is the flagship brake in SRAM's arsenal. There's more to it than lightweight titanium bolts and a fancy carbon lever blade, though.

The key difference to the regular Guide brake is the new S4 caliper with its integrated Heat Shield — a small U-shaped steel insert that sits just in front of the pads. And as simple as that sounds, it really does prevent the brake from overheating. How can we be so sure? Well, in addition to our standard testing in South Wales, the Guide Ultimate endured three days of chairlift-assisted riding in the Alps. It was blisteringly hot and the trails were super-steep, but not once did the Ultimate brake falter — modulation was great and it always had plenty of power in reserve, too.

SRAM has really nailed the lever feel



and position on the Ultimate, and while we used the minimum Contact Point Adjustment setting, the wide range of adjustability makes it easy to get your preferred lever feel. Our only criticism of the SRAM brake is that the reach adjuster feels flimsy, and we suspect that it's prone to creeping ever so slightly too. Not cheap, but they do offer unrivalled control.





# Verdict

We said earlier that the ideal brake has to be both powerful and well modulated.

If it's underpowered, you'll end up pulling too hard to slow down, which can affect the way you set up for a corner or ride a technical section. Conversely, if the brake is too harsh, you can over-brake coming into a corner, losing grip and traction. Fortunately, most of the brakes in this test have sufficient power, but it's the combination of feel, lever shape, ease of set-up and reliability that gain top scores.

Despite the low price of the budget brakes, they still work great. The Clarks M2 is truly amazing value, but it has an uncomfortable lever and is short on stopping power compared to the Avid DB3 and Shimano Alivio. A bigger rotor and different pads may help, but they would bump up the price.

Ease of set-up is another key requirement at the budget end, and this is what separates the Avid DB3 and Shimano. The DB3 feels great, but it's tricky to bleed, whereas the Shimano is a doddle to set up and, when you factor in a bleed kit, is also better value.

Lightweight disc brakes are obviously all about weight saving, but there is a law of diminishing returns. You really have to ask yourself whether saving 56g (the difference between the Shimano XTR Race and Formula R1 Racing) is worth the £80 gap in price, especially when the latter has more expensive rotors and shifter clamps.

Both the FSA K-Force and Magura MT8 feel a bit delicate, but in slightly different ways. Having said that, they might be fine for XC racing, where the terrain isn't that gnarly and the bikes and riders weigh next to nothing.

When you need to scrub off a load of speed, a four-pot brake really comes into its own. Feel is key, but of equal importance is stopping power and heat management (and reliability, of course, but that's a given). Unfortunately, the Magura MT7 didn't even

get to first base, and despite a subsequent bleed, still leaked fluid.

Like the other Shimano brakes in this test, the Saint is great value, but there's a bit too much lever travel and ramp-up. The Hope Tech 3 E4 was reliable and easy to set up, but it needs a tad more power, and it's a banshee in the wet.

Top of the four-piston brakes is SRAM's Guide Ultimate — pricey but with great lever feel, tons of power and able to handle Alpine riding with ease. For these reasons, it really is the ultimate.



	Price	Weight	Rotor weight	Rotor sizes	Contact	Rating
<b>BUDGET</b>						
<b>Avid DB3</b>	£95	343g	161g (180mm)	160, 180, 200mm	fisheroutdoor.co.uk	8
<b>Clarks M2</b>	£20	257g	167g	160, 180mm	clarkscyclesystems.com	8
<b>Shimano Alivio</b>	£64.98	279g	146g	160, 180, 203mm	madison.co.uk	10
<b>LIGHTWEIGHT</b>						
<b>Formula R1 Racing</b>	£283.95	165g	127g	160, 180, 203mm	silverfish-uk.com	8
<b>FSA K-Force</b>	£269.90	200g	132g	140, 160, 180mm	windwave.co.uk	7
<b>Magura MT8</b>	£269.99	223g	131g	140, 160, 180, 203mm	zyro.co.uk	7
<b>Shimano XTR Race</b>	£219.98	191g	139g	160, 180, 203mm	madison.co.uk	10
<b>FOUR-PISTON</b>						
<b>Hope Tech 3 E4</b>	£189	248g	160g	160, 183, 203mm	hopetech.com	8
<b>Magura MT7</b>	£219.99	253g	156g	160, 180, 203mm	zyro.co.uk	8
<b>Shimano Saint</b>	£185.98	309g	144g	160, 180, 203mm	madison.co.uk	7
<b>SRAM Guide Ultimate</b>	£264	247g	161g	140, 160, 170, 180, 200mm	fisheroutdoor.co.uk	8



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[FEATURES]

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# DISCOUNTED 2015 BIKES

*Silly season is upon us so we've selected three cut-price machines to help you bag a bargain or suss out if the savings come with a hidden cost*

*Words: Alan Muldoon Photos: Roo Fowler*





TESTED  
THIS  
MONTH



### SPECIALIZED ROCKHOPPER PRO EVO 650B

£960 (Reduced from £1,200)



### BMC SPEEDFOX SF02 XT

£2,520 (Reduced from £3,150)



### VITUS ESCARPE 290 PRO

£2,699.99 (Reduced from £3,599.99)



**E**very year the mountain bike industry reinvents itself and launches a slew of 'new' bikes just in time for the end of summer. It's madness really, and often the changes amount to little more than a lick of paint or a minor modification to the spec.

This annual cycle runs like clockwork, but with such a short selling season, retailers often end up with current bikes in the stock room while next year's models are already taking pride of place on manufacturers' websites. Hence sales spring up almost daily, and for the savvy shopper who's not bothered about having the very latest kit, there are some serious discounts to be had.

Just because a bike looks like a bargain, however, doesn't mean it's good value. In fact you could argue that the very reason it's being flogged off cheap is that no one wanted it, or it was too expensive in the first place.

So to find out if there are any killer deals to be had in the silly season, we've selected three discounted bikes for this month's test.

First up, there's the Specialized Rockhopper Pro Evo. It's a cool-looking 650b hardtail that originally retailed for £1,200, but is currently available for £960 from Specialized Concept Stores and selected dealers. Next, we have the BMC Speedfox SF02 XT. BMC is available exclusively through Evans Cycles, and the price of this 130mm-travel 29er has been slashed from £3,150 to £2,520 — pretty amazing given that it has a carbon front end and a full Shimano XT groupset.

## BAG A BARGAIN

### Five tips for buying a discounted bike

- 1 Do your research. There's every chance that all of the bikes that scored perfect 10 ratings in **mbr** will have sold out by now. Ideally, you're looking for bikes that have had favourable reviews, but couldn't match the best models on price or spec.
- 2 Once you've narrowed down your selection, start checking availability. Discounts come and go almost daily so you need to be vigilant to bag the best deals.
- 3 No matter how attractive the discount is, DON'T be tempted to buy a bike that's the wrong size, as you'll only regret it.
- 4 Future-proof your ride by getting a bike with 27.5in (650b) or 29in wheels. That said, if you're a diehard 26in fan, some bikes are up to 50 per cent off!
- 5 Don't forget to check bike manufacturers' websites for ex-demo bikes. Just stay well clear of any bike that has been used for a magazine test, as they don't see much in the way of TLC.



They're going cheap but that doesn't mean we're letting them off lightly...

## CONTROL TYRES

To make the testing process as fair as possible, we fitted 27.5x2.3in Maxxis High Roller IIs to the Specialized and Minion DHF 29x2.3in tyres to the BMC and Vitus. Prices start at £29.99, [extrauk.co.uk](http://extrauk.co.uk)

## Just because a bike looks like a bargain, however, doesn't mean it's good value

The final bike in our discounted trio is also a 29er, this time from Vitus — the in-house brand of Chain Reaction Cycles. With a sleek alloy frame, RockShox Pike fork, SRAM 1x11 drivetrain and Mavic wheels, it certainly delivers on value. The real question is, which one will also deliver the best performance? Let's find out.



We headed to the hills to test two full-sussers and a hardtail

## WHERE AND HOW

### Tale of the test

Even though price variations meant this wasn't a regular **mbr** head-to-head test, we still fitted our Maxxis control tyres to all three bikes, and put them through the same exacting test procedure that we normally do.

The reason? We weren't only looking to see how each bike performed in isolation. We rode all of them on our regular test loops in the Surrey Hills and South Wales to find out how each one stacked up against every other 2015 bike that we have tested of a similar style. It's not enough to be cheap; we're also looking for stellar performance.



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- Emma Phillips, Quainton stud.

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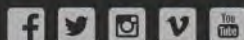
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## BIKE TEST

A replaceable hanger helps protect the frame and rear mech if you crash

Specialized's Body Geometry grips look comfy, with their additional wrist support; the drawback is they lock your hands in a single position

The Rockhopper frame sports a tapered head tube and corresponding fork for improved steering precision

With five frame sizes to choose from, getting the perfect fit should be easy

**SAVE  
20%**

# SPECIALIZED ROCKHOPPER PRO EVO 650B

£960 (REDUCED FROM £1,200)

## SPECIFICATION

**Frame** A1 SL aluminium  
**Fork** RockShox XC32 Solo Air, 120mm travel  
**Wheels** Specialized Hi Lo hubs, Stout XC rims, Specialized Ground Control 27.5x2.3in tyres  
**Drivetrain** Specialized Stout XC chainset, SRAM X5 f-mech and shifters, X9 r-mech  
**Brakes** Tektro Gemini Comp 180/160mm  
**Components** Specialized TranzX Dropper Post, 100mm  
**Sizes** XS, S, M, L, XL  
**Weight** 13.62kg (30lb)  
**Contact** specializedconceptstore.co.uk

## GEOMETRY

**Size tested** 19in  
**Head angle** 69.6°  
**Seat angle** 73.3°  
**BB height** 310mm  
**Chainstay** 427mm  
**Front centre** 690mm  
**Wheelbase** 1,117mm  
**Down tube** 680mm  
**Top tube** 629mm  
**Reach** 427mm

**T**he Evo tag on a Specialized usually rubberstamps it as a bike designed for more aggressive riders. Wider bars, more travel, better tyres — all go part and parcel with the Evo attitude — and the specification on the 650b Rockhopper hardtail is no different.

Even with its bespoke alloy frame, the Rockhopper's geometry leans more toward XC than trail riding. It doesn't have much in the way of stand-over clearance either, at least not on the size L, so the bike instantly felt more cumbersome than we thought it would. Also, because the top tube has been flattened, if you clip your knee on its angular profile when cornering or getting loose, it's surprisingly painful.

A feature we really like on the Rockhopper are the bridgeless stays. Not only do they offer tons of tyre clearance, they also make it much harder for mud to collect on the frame. The rear brake caliper is neatly concealed between the seat and chainstays, and thankfully it doesn't push the stays out so far as to cause heel-rub.

Specialized's full-suspension bikes all get custom rubberised chainstay protectors, but there are no such luxuries on the flagship Rockhopper — which is a real shame. So, even with the SRAM X9 Type II clutch mech helping stabilise the chain, the bright orange paint on the chainstay was chipped and tatty after the very first ride. Not cool.

## SUSPENSION

In keeping with the Evo theme, the Rockhopper gets a RockShox XC32 fork with 15mm Maxle lowers and a



Lack of standover clearance lent an ungainly feel



## BIKE TEST



RockShox XC32 fork has great small-bump sensitivity



Dropper post as standard is an asset

tapered steerer for improved stiffness and security. Travel has also been pumped up to 120mm — the regular 29er Rockhoppers have 20mm less.

The chromed steel upper tubes on the XC32 aren't the lightest, but the surface finish is incredibly smooth and hard-wearing, so the fork has great small-bump sensitivity and should prove very durable.

## COMPONENTS

Being able to drop the saddle by 100mm at a moment's notice really boosts confidence when tackling more challenging terrain (on what essentially amounts to a pumped-up XC bike), so top marks must go to Specialized for fitting a dropper seatpost to the Rockhopper.

Equally impressive were the Tektro Gemini Comp brakes. It was super-easy to get the levers exactly where we wanted them, and once the pads bedded-in, we enjoyed one-finger braking all the way.

Obscured by the Tektro brake levers are SRAM X5 shifters. They are a couple of rungs down the SRAM hierarchy from the show-stopping X9 rear mech, and while the shifters never missed a beat, they do have a more laboured action than equivalent-level Shimano units.



**HIGHS**  
Climbs like an XC bike

On the move, the Rockhopper failed to really excite us

**LOWS**  
Descends like an XC bike

## PERFORMANCE

The Ground Control tyres on the Rockhopper left us scratching our heads, as they didn't seem to offer much in the way of grip, yet they also felt very draggy. On swapping them for our Maxxis control tyres, we noticed that they had relatively rigid, Flack Jacket puncture resistant strips under the tread, to protect from thorns and glass. Unfortunately, this also made the tyres much harder to deform, which accounted for the increased rolling resistance.

The lightweight alloy Rockhopper frame offered a reasonably comfortable ride, and while it plods along at a steady click, it's only when you hit a climb that you get an injection of enthusiasm. Power delivery is great as you crank onwards and upwards, and it was easy to keep the front end down.

Good as that is, it's too one-dimensional for us, and elsewhere the Rockhopper failed to inspire us to really attack the trail in the way the best hardtails do.

In that respect, the Rockhopper Pro Evo didn't really live up to its Evo billing. Yes, it gets a wider bar, a bolt-thru fork, beefy tyres and a dropper post, but these are just sprinkles of glitter on an otherwise lacklustre bike.



Bright orange it is, but revolutionary it is not

## VERDICT

It may have the Evo tag and build-kit to match, but Specialized seems to have forgotten to instil the Rockhopper Pro with the all-important Evo attitude. Not once did we feel like we could push our limits, and we always felt more like a passenger that was simply along for the ride.

It's definitely a suitable companion for racking up miles, or working on your fitness, but there are literally thousands of hardtails that do just that. Specialized is going to need more than a bright orange finish if it really wants the Rockhopper Pro Evo to stand out from the crowd.

7



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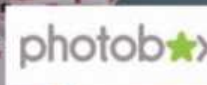
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The 150mm drop RockShox Reverb Stealth lets you slam the saddle to hammer the descents

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Internal cable routing maintains the clean-flowing lines of the carbon front end

A chainstay-mounted chain-guide works in conjunction with Shimano's Shadow Plus rear mech to help keep the chain on

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## BMC SPEEDFOX SF02 XT

£2,520 (REDUCED FROM £3,150)

### SPECIFICATION

**Frame** Carbon/aluminium, 130mm travel  
**Shock** Fox Float CTD Evo  
**Fork** Fox 32 Float CTD Evo, 130mm travel  
**Wheels** DT Swiss M1700 Spline Two, Continental Mtn King/X-King 29x2.2in tyres  
**Drivetrain** Shimano XT chainset, f-mech, r-mech and shifters  
**Brakes** Shimano XT 180mm  
**Components** BMC, RockShox Reverb Stealth 150mm  
**Sizes** S, M, L  
**Weight** 13.58kg (29.9lb)  
**Contact** [evanscycles.com](http://evanscycles.com)

### GEOMETRY

**Size tested** L  
**Head angle** 68.4°  
**Seat angle** 70.5°  
**BB height** 335mm  
**Chainstay** 433mm  
**Front centre** 743mm  
**Wheelbase** 1,176mm  
**Down tube** 713mm  
**Top tube** 630mm  
**Reach** 455mm

Launched just 12 months ago, the 130mm-travel Speedfox bridges the gap between BMC's 100mm-travel Fourstroke XC race bike and the 150mm travel Trailfox.

In keeping with the other bikes in the 2015 range, the Speedfox rolls on 29in wheels. And it's not just the wheel size that's common to all three platforms; they also share BMC's signature APS twin-link suspension design.

The middle bike in a five-strong range, the SF02 XT gets the carbon-fibre front end of the more expensive Speedfox models, and the aluminium rear end of the cheaper bikes. We've had some clearance issues on BMCs before, but the layout of the new rear triangle, with its wishbone upright, completely eliminates the need for a seatstay bridge, so that's firmly in the past. The wishbone design is also key to the relatively short, 433mm chainstay length — doubling as the mount for the front mech, it moves as the suspension compresses and provides better clearance.

### SUSPENSION

For ease of set-up, the Speedfox sports a small sag indicator at the seatstay/rocker-link junction. It recommends a window between hard and soft, but even in the firmest setting the rear suspension bottoms out too easily. It also bobbed a lot when pedalling, especially in the big ring. In the end, we ran the Fox CTD shock permanently in Trail mode to calm it down, even if this eroded grip and reduced comfort.



Spindly fork and narrow bar were shown up through fast direction changes



## BIKE TEST



Chainstay-mounted guide keeps the drivetrain in check



Revised rocker link and seatstay design has solved BMC's clearance issues

Fox has had a pretty bad run with its CTD forks, but we had no complaints about harshness on the 32 Float. The fork still lacks support, though, and it's not really stiff enough for such a capable 29er — a Fox 34 would really help shore up the front end.

## COMPONENTS

BMC hasn't messed about when it comes to reining in the Speedfox; Shimano XT brakes with 180mm rotors front and rear put most of the four-piston units in this month's brake test to shame. But what was BMC thinking when it fitted a 720mm bar to a bike that carries so much speed? We'd like to see a 750mm handlebar straight out of the box; that way, you could chop it down if needed.

We love how stiff the hollow-forged Shimano XT cranks feel underfoot, but we're not convinced that the 38/24t gearing combo is the best match for the BMC's suspension, as chain tension in the big ring causes the suspension to compress with every pedal stroke.

## PERFORMANCE

We're always impressed by how hard you can ride a good 29er. Not only do they



**HIGHS**  
Great angles and 29er wheels offer a fast, fun ride

The Speedfox has plenty of potential but, in this spec, never quite fulfils it

**LOWS**  
Suspension is too active when climbing

carry incredible speed, the extra stability means you never need to tiptoe through the roughest sections of trail. Given the great geometry, and a compliant carbon front triangle on the Speedfox, it's hardly surprising that the spindly Fox 32 fork struggled to keep the bike on track — all the more reason to fit a wider handlebar.

But it wasn't just the stiffness of the fork that we took issue with. The rear shock lacked the necessary progression to stop the BMC ripping through its 130mm travel in a heartbeat. This inherent lack of support also meant that the back end of the bike squatted too readily when cornering, causing the front end to go light and the bike to run wide when exiting the turn. Flipping the shock into Trail mode really helped prop up the rear and load the front tyre when cornering, but it also reduced traction and did nothing to prevent the suspension from bottoming out multiple times on every trail.

You could argue that we were riding the Speedfox beyond its design remit, but we're not really sure what its intended use is, as it never felt like it pedalled well enough to be considered a proper short-travel ripper.



Carbon front end and internal cabling underline the BMC's superb build quality

## VERDICT

The BMC Speedfox is brimming with potential. It's got great geometry for a 130mm-travel 29er, and the carbon front end offers an incredibly forgiving ride. There's no faulting the quality of the Shimano components, either.

However, the balance isn't quite right. Up front, the slender Fox 32 fork, narrow handlebar and 70mm stem hint at a lightweight, efficient trail bike, but the overly active rear suspension means it doesn't deliver on this promise. It's still a total blast to ride, but it needs a stiffer fork and more progressive shock to really shine.







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A knobby WTB Vigilante up front provides great cornering traction, while the low-profile Trail Boss rear tyre keeps the rolling tempo high

Shimano XT brakes with 180mm rotors front and rear offer unmatched stopping power and reliability

Armour on the underside of the down tube protects the alloy frame and more importantly your rear brake hose from getting damaged

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# VITUS ESCARPE 290 PRO

£2,699.99 (REDUCED FROM £3,599.99)

## SPECIFICATION

**Frame** 6061-T6 aluminium, 135mm travel  
**Shock** RockShox Monarch RT3  
**Fork** RockShox Pike RCT3, 150mm travel  
**Wheels** Mavic Crossmax XL 29, WTB Vigilante/Trail Boss 29x2.3/2.25in tyres  
**Drivetrain** SRAM X01 chainset and r-mech, X1 shifters  
**Brakes** Shimano XT, 180mm  
**Components** NukeProof Warhead bar, Funn Strippa stem, RockShox Reverb Stealth 125mm  
**Sizes** S,M, L, XL  
**Weight** 13.94g (30.7lb)  
**Contact** chainreactioncycles.com

## GEOMETRY

**Size tested** L  
**Head angle** 67.4°  
**Seat angle** 68.9°  
**BB height** 344mm  
**Chainstay** 450mm  
**Front centre** 745mm  
**Wheelbase** 1,195mm  
**Down tube** 723mm  
**Top tube** 621mm  
**Reach** 446mm

**W**hen we first set eyes on the new range of 29er Escarpes, we were instantly struck by the bespoke frame design and the gaping hole in the pricing of the three available models. With only £200 separating the entry-level Escarpe (£1,499.99) from the VR version, there was a massive jump of almost £2,000 to the top-of-the-range Escarpe 290 Pro tested here. Vitus was sorely missing a £2.5k bike to compete with the likes of the Specialized, Canyon and Cube.

Twelve months on, that model is now available, thanks to a generous 25 per cent end-of-season discount. And what a blinding 29er it is. The frame delivers 135mm of travel, thanks to the new V-Link, four-bar suspension design. It's got a floating shock too, where the lower eyelet is mounted to an extension of the chainstay yoke and moves forward as the suspension compresses. It's very similar to Trek's Full Floater design, and allows for an extra degree of fine-tuning over progressivity.

Frame stiffness has also been a priority for Vitus. The BB and main pivot housing are forged from a single chunk of aluminium, and the frame is top and tailed by a tapered head tube and 142x12mm rear dropouts.

## SUSPENSION

With a 150mm travel Pike leading the charge, the Escarpe was taking no prisoners on the descents. It's the top-end RCT3 version, too, so you've got all of the damping adjustments you need at your fingertips. We slammed an extra ➡



Solid, fast and incredibly capable: the Escarpe is a blast



**HIGHS**

Great spec and even better handling

**TEST WINNER!****mbr**

With the sag set to 30 per cent, the Escarpe felt spot-on

SRAM drivetrain is mixed with Shimano brakes

At £2.5k, this is a lot more fun than Al's face might suggest

**LOWS**

The BB could be lower

Bottomless Token in the fork to get the Solo Air spring to ramp up faster and prevent diving under braking or on the steepest descents. This also helped the balance and better maintained the dynamic geometry.

On the rear, we ran exactly 30 per cent sag, as per the markings on the Monarch RT3 rear shock, with the rider seated and the bike felt spot on. The 135mm travel never felt overly soft, and we were able to ride the Vitus with the shock in the open setting even on the steepest climbs.

**COMPONENTS**

You get the best of both worlds in terms of spec: SRAM's wide-range 1x11 drivetrain and Shimano's ultra-reliable XT brakes. Mavic's new Crossmax XL 29er wheels are also a big step up in terms of stiffness, but it's their lightning fast acceleration and resistance-free hubs that really set them apart. Yes, the 23mm internal rim width isn't on trend, but given the amount of grip that's available on a 29er, we never felt the need for bigger tyres or wider rims. You do need to keep on top of wheel tension though, as Mavic's

fat alloy spokes have a tendency to unwind.

And it's not just the eye candy that Vitus has focused on. You also get a right-hand Reverb remote flipped neatly under the handlebar on the left, and an E13 chain guide to prevent your chain coming off in the heat of the moment.

**PERFORMANCE**

Even though the Escarpe isn't pumping out massive amounts of travel on the rear, it's certainly geared more towards aggressive riding. That's not to say it doesn't pedal efficiently, or cover ground effortlessly, it just feels more like a 29er enduro bike than most big wheelers with similar amounts of travel.

Solid, fast and incredibly capable, we think the Vitus Escarpe is exactly how a good 29er should be. If you're not attacking steep, nasty descents on a regular basis, however, the riser bar will feel a little high, even with the 45mm slammed directly on the headset. For this reason alone, we'd probably fit a flat bar, then raise the stem if needed.

With 170mm crankarms, you won't have any pedal clearance issues on steep rock climbs either. And much as we like being able to smuggle pedal turns in wherever we can, Vitus could definitely get away with running the BB slightly lower on the Escarpe 290 Pro, although one offset shock mount should be all that's needed to rectify this yourself.

**VERDICT**

If the devil truly is in the detail, then the matt black Vitus Escarpe 290 Pro was forged in the furnace of hell. The new alloy frame is up there with the best brands, and there isn't a single component that needs changing straightaway. Just hop on board and commence trailblazing.

At the original RRP, Vitus was too ambitious with its pricing, pitching it more in line with regular bricks and mortar brands rather than its direct sales rivals; with 25 per cent off, however, given the level of performance and kit on offer, it's an absolute steal.







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# Conclusion

In the introduction to this test, we said that it wasn't enough for brands to simply offer hefty discounts; to really excel here the bikes also needed to provide top-tier performance.

In that vein, the Specialized Rockhopper Pro Evo 650b was the most disappointing bike on test. Even with its Evo build kit, the Rockhopper lacked sparkle, and left us feeling deflated after every ride. It's basically an XC bike with a hop-up kit, and the handling is a far cry from the best trail hardtails on the market. So, even with the sizeable discount, we weren't convinced that there was any added value over a £750 hardtail. And while we're on the subject of value, if you have £1,000 to spend on a new bike, get down to Go Outdoors and treat yourself to the Calibre Bossnut. This 130mm-travel full-suspension bike not only has a better ride quality than the Rockhopper, it's also got a better spec. All you need is a Go Outdoors discount card.

Even though we gave the BMC Speedfox XT the exact same rating as the Specialized, it was for very different reasons. Every ride on the Speedfox felt like a mini adventure, and it never failed to put a smile on our faces. The rear suspension had plenty of pop and stacks of traction, and the geometry was bang-on for a 130mm-travel 29er. So why the relatively low, seven rating? Basically, the rear shock would bottom-out too easily and too often, and the spindly Fox 32mm fork couldn't handle the pace of the 29in wheels. The BMC also needs a wider bar, shorter stem, better tyres and a 1x chainring and extender cog straight out of the box. That's a relatively long shopping list for a brand new bike; so even with the 20 per cent discount, the BMC isn't great value.

That just leaves the Vitus Escarpe 290 Pro. At the full RRP, the build kit on the Vitus definitely gave it the upper hand over most of its high street rivals, but compared to direct sales brands like YT and Canyon it wasn't such a compelling package. With 25 per cent off, however, the Vitus is a very attractive proposition indeed. And it's not just the jaw-dropping spec that seduced us; the ride quality of the Escarpe 290 Pro is every bit as appealing. If the thought of riding a 29er makes you come over all funny, though, fret not, as Chain Reaction is currently discounting the 650b version of the Escarpe Pro to the tune of 15 per cent.

**With 25 per cent off, the Vitus is a very attractive proposition, its spec jaw-dropping**



## RANGE FINDER

### Other great discounted bikes

#### ORANGE FIVE S

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(reduced from £2,499, [sunsetmtb.co.uk](http://sunsetmtb.co.uk))

It's hard to beat the classic Orange Five, but getting frames made in the UK isn't cheap, so the 12 per cent discount offered by Sunset MTB is very welcome. This 2015 Five S has 140mm travel, thanks to RockShox suspension, but it doesn't get the longer top tube and shorter stem of the latest version. It still rolls on 650b wheels though, and best of all, is available in a full range of sizes.



#### KONA PROCESS 111

£2,699.25

(reduced from £3,599)

When we put together our Supercharged 29er test back in December, the only bike to elude us was the Kona Process 111. It may only have 111mm of travel on the rear, but it certainly isn't short on attitude. With a RockShox Pike fork and cutting-edge 1x11 drivetrain bolted to the stout aluminium frame, the Kona Process puts paid to the myth that 29ers aren't fun.





Not just a bargain,  
the Vitus is a hoot  
to ride fast

## ANGLE FINDER

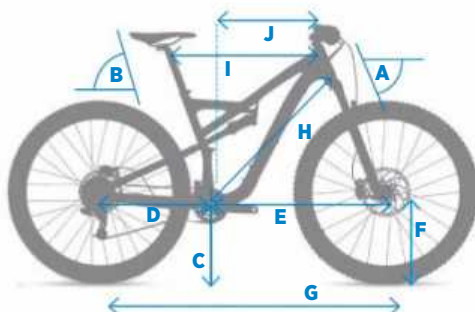
# Specification: vital statistics compared

Make/model	Specialized Rockhopper Pro EVO 650b	BMC Speedfox TF02 XT	Vitus Escarpe 290 Pro
Price	£960	£2,520	£2,699.99
Weight	13.62kg (30lb)	13.58kg (29.9lb)	13.94g (30.7lb)
Contact	specializedconceptstore.co.uk	evanscycles.com	chainreactioncycles.com
<b>FRAME</b>			
Sizes	XS, S, M, L, XL	S, M, L	S, M, L, XL
Size tested	L	L	L
Frame material	A1 SL aluminium	Carbon/aluminium	6061-T6 aluminium
Suspension fork	RockShox XC32 Solo Air	Fox 32 Float CTD Evo	RockShox Pike RCT3
Rear shock	N/A	Fox Float CTD Evo	RockShox Monarch RT3
Front travel	120mm	130mm	150mm
Rear travel	N/A	130mm	135mm
<b>WHEELS</b>			
Hubs	Specialized Hi Lo 15/135mm	DT Swiss 15/142mm	Mavic CrossmaxXL 29 15/142mm
Rims	Specialized Stout XC 650b	DT Swiss M1700 Spline Two	Crossmax XL
Spokes	Stainless	DT Swiss	Mavic
Tyres	Specialized Ground Control 27.5x2.3in	Continental Mtn King/X-King 29x2.2in	WTB Vigilante/Trail Boss 29x2.3/2.25in
<b>GROUPSET</b>			
Shifters	SRAM X5 2x10	Shimano XT	SRAM X1
Front mech	SRAM X5	Shimano XT	N/A
Rear mech	SRAM X9 Type II	Shimano XT Shadow Plus	SRAM X01
Crank	Specialized Stout XC 36/22t	Shimano XT 38/24	SRAM X01 32T
Bottom bracket	Samox BSA	Shimano PF	SRAM GXP
Brakes	Tektro Gemini Comp	Shimano XT	Shimano XT
Rotor sizes	180/160mm	180mm	180mm
<b>COMPONENTS</b>			
Saddle	Body Geometry	Fizik Nisene	Vitus
Seatpost	TranzX Dropper 100mm	RockShox Reverb Stealth	RockShox Reverb Stealth
Handlebar	Specialized 750mm	BMC 720mm	NukeProof Warhead 760mm
Stem	Specialized 70mm	BMC 70mm	Funn Strippa 45mm
Rating	7	7	10

## ANGLE FINDER

# Geometry: what the numbers mean

We've mentioned it before, but it bears repeating, don't be tempted to buy a bike that doesn't fit, no matter how enticing the discount. By far the easiest way to compare bike sizing is to look at the reach measurements. All three bikes in this test were size large, but the BMC was 10mm longer than the Vitus. That's why it was easy for us to swap the stock 70mm stem on the BMC for a 55mm without the cockpit feeling cramped. Interestingly, the top tube measurement on the Specialized is within 1mm of the BMC, so the distance between your saddle and hands feels very similar. Stand up, though, and the BMC feels roomier, as its reach is 30mm longer.



	Specialized	BMC	Vitus
<b>A Head angle</b>	69.6°	68.4°	67.4°
<b>B Seat angle</b>	73.3°	70.5°	68.9°
<b>C BB height</b>	310mm	335mm	344mm
<b>D Chain stay</b>	427mm	433mm	450mm
<b>E Front centre</b>	690mm	743mm	745mm
<b>F Wheelbase</b>	1,117mm	1,176mm	1,195mm
<b>G Down tube</b>	680mm	713mm	723mm
<b>H Top tube</b>	629mm	630mm	621mm
<b>I Reach</b>	427mm	455mm	446mm






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# Afterimage

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AS CHOSEN BY...

**ANDY LLOYD,  
PHOTOGRAPHER**



Who: Rowan Sorrell  
Where: Blue Mountain, Jamaica  
When: March 2014



Andy spent a large part of his photographic career covering news and sport for the national newspapers. He went freelance in 2010 to shift his emphasis to shooting mountain biking; something that had always been on the back burner. A rider of over 20 years, he now gets to combine his two passions of bikes and photography.

**A**s with anyone invited to contribute to this section, choosing a favourite photo is always going to be an unenviable task, but as a photographer I find it even harder. So rather than going for an amazing action shot, I have chosen an image that sums up an entire trip.

Trail-building maestro Rowan Sorrell is a pretty lucky chap; not only did he go to Jamaica on his stag do, he also managed to persuade (didn't take much) a large group of his mates to part with a not insubstantial wedge of cash to go with him.

It was a wide-ranging group made up of everyone from World Cup racers all the way through to beginner-level riders with no bike of their own. All of us embarked on what turned out to be, not only a great mountain bike holiday, but also the trip of a lifetime.

I could probably have chosen any image from the trip (riding or otherwise) as my favourite, as just about every shot has a memory that represents a truly stunning adventure. This frame was taken on a ride down from Blue Mountain Peak, at 2,250m the highest on Jamaica. Starting out at dawn, after a night in the Jamaican equivalent of a mountain refuge, a three-hour ride/carry was rewarded with a truly stunning view and an incredible

descent. An amazing, never-ending, technical wonder of a trail, going through a seemingly ever-changing range of flora all the way to the outskirts of Kingston (and eventually sea level).

This image represents what was for me an amazing adventure, the bike trip to end all bike trips, made extra special by an amazing country experienced with good friends both old and new, British and Jamaican.

**Starting out at dawn, a three-hour ride/  
carry was rewarded with a truly stunning  
view and an incredible descent**



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